JULY 6

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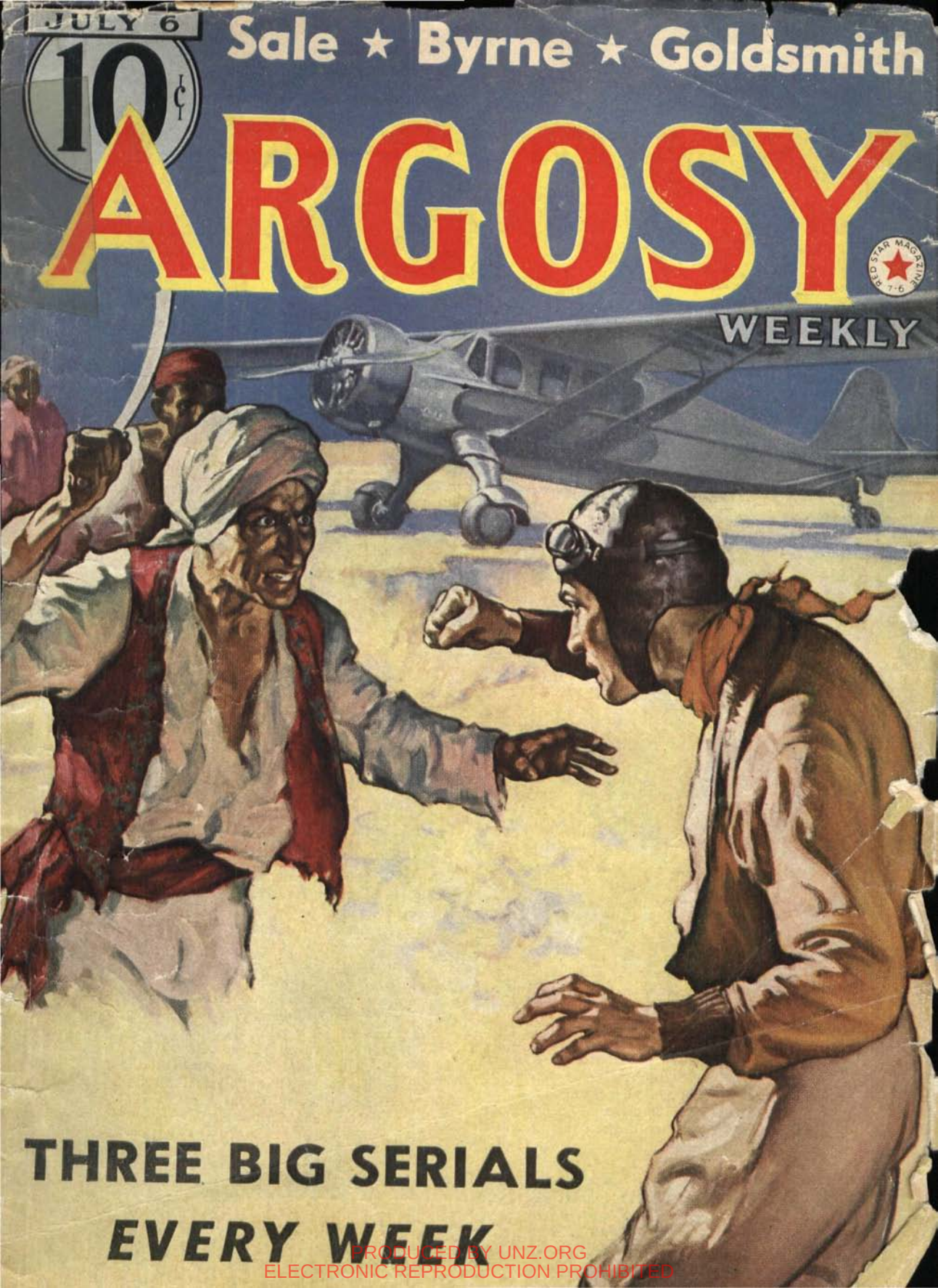
Sale ★ Byrne ★ Goldsmith

ARGOSY

RED STAR MAGAZINE 7-6

WEEKLY



THREE BIG SERIALS

EVERY WEEK

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GOOD BYE DANDRUFF SYMPTOMS!

THE TREATMENT

MEN: Douse full strength Listerine Antiseptic on the scalp morning and night.

WOMEN: Part the hair at various places, and apply Listerine Antiseptic right along the part with a medicine dropper, to avoid wetting the hair excessively.

Always follow with vigorous and persistent massage with fingers or a good hair brush. Continue the treatment so long as dandruff is in evidence. And even though you're free from dandruff, enjoy a Listerine massage once a week to guard against infection. Listerine is the same antiseptic that has been famous for more than 50 years as a mouth wash and gargle.

Soothing Listerine Antiseptic Treatment gives hair and scalp antiseptic bath . . . kills millions of germs associated with infectious dandruff

If infectious dandruff has got you in its grip . . . if you are constantly embarrassed by all the ugly, distressing symptoms of this stubborn disease—the humiliating flakes and scales, the itching, or even inflammation . . . here's news—*grand news!*

Listerine Antiseptic kills millions of the germs associated with the infectious type of dandruff—an all too common form of this scalp condition. It destroys, on contact, countless numbers of these tiny, almost invisible parasites, including the queer "bottle bacillus," called Pityrosporum Ovale, which outstanding specialists recognize as a causative agent of infectious dandruff.

First Listerine treats hair and scalp to a cooling, soothing antiseptic bath. The scalp tingles and glows, ugly flakes and scales begin to go . . . inflammation and itching are alleviated. Then Listerine gets to work on the germs themselves. In test after test, in laboratory and clinic, Listerine Antiseptic's germicidal action brought amazingly quick results.

Improvement in 76% of Test Cases

When rabbits were inoculated with Pityrosporum Ovale in laboratory research, they quickly developed the usual dandruff symptoms. Within 14 days, on the average, these symptoms disappeared when Listerine Antiseptic was applied daily to the affected areas.

Clinical tests on men and women who used Listerine Antiseptic and massage twice a day brought even more impressive results. In one series of tests, 76% of dandruff sufferers showed either complete disappearance of or marked improvement in the symptoms of dandruff within 30 days. So, if you have the slightest sign of a dandruff condition, do not neglect what may be a real infection. Start right now with Listerine Antiseptic and massage. Neglect may aggravate the symptoms.

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Not a magic formula—not a get-rich-quick scheme—but something more substantial, more practical.

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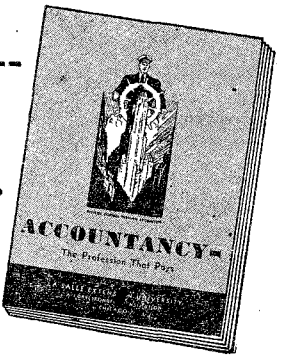

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ARGOSY

America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

Volume 300 CONTENTS FOR JULY 6, 1940 Number 3

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The Yankee kid knew two things: how to fly and how to round up wild horses. But nobody had ever told him what to do with a nabob's brother wielding a knife

Old Chainmouth—*Short Story*.....Richard Sale 25
Fishing trip extraordinary, in which Pop Shannon trades the best years of his life for half a ton of malicious dynamite

Guns on Fire—*First of three parts*.....Jack Byrne 36
Pilgrim, welcome to Rapid City. In your honor our leading citizens are carrying sneak-guns, and we've fixed up a little celebration that should blow you to Kingdom Come. A roaring new Western

Miracle on Main Street—*Novelet*.....Robert Arthur 57
Just for a day it lasted—the thing every man has dreamed of—the fine spectacle of each of his neighbors getting exactly what he deserved

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Introducing Orson Quick, that Forty-second Street hayseed, the boy who fears neither homicide nor horoscopes

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Cover by Marshall Frantz
Illustrating Rajah Bill

This magazine is on sale every Wednesday

A **RED STAR** *Magazine*

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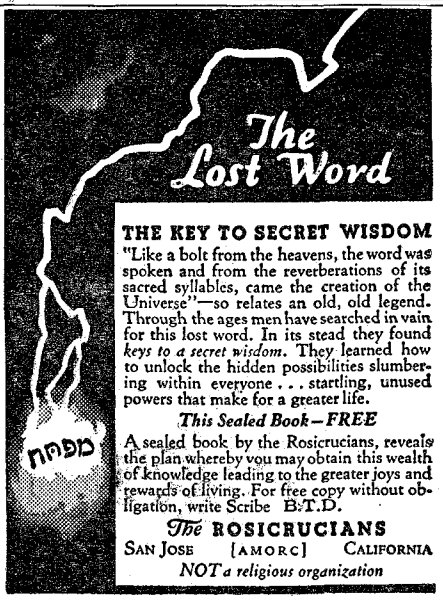

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29x5.00-19	2.85	1.25
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.25
6.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-19	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
5.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-19	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
6.00-17	3.40	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.55
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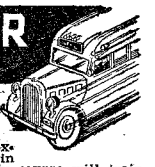

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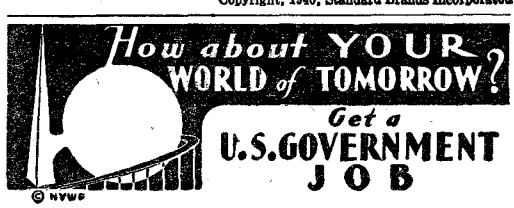

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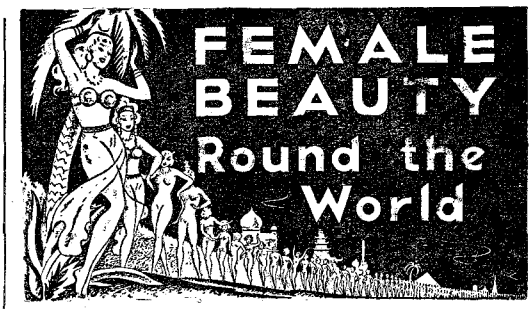

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Novelet

Rajah Bill

By LOUIS C. GOLDSMITH

Author of "One Time a Man," "Gold in the Sky," etc.

I

BILL'S hands told him that somebody was moving forward in the Waldoon's cabin. Looking at those narrow palms, slender long fingers curled lightly over the control wheel, you would call them artist's hands. Then you saw the grease-darkened, close-clipped fingernails and knew that Bill wasn't an artist. At least he didn't paint pictures or play a fiddle.

The control cab door opened behind. Bill knew this by the slight change of air pressure. He looked back over his shoulder. It was the Englishman or, rather, the American who talked and acted like an Englishman because he had been in East India for three years. Dinner he called tiffin and supper was dinner and Bill didn't know what had become of supper, the kind they used to eat at home.

"Busy, old chap?" Calvert Carter asked.

Bill smiled, shook his head. He glanced

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Bill was battling off three of them, unaware that the maharajah stood watching silently

Pleased to meet you, Maharajah. I'm Bill Miles—just call me Bill—and if you'd like the Hindu caste system streamlined, I'd sure be glad to oblige. One thing, though: Knives make me mad

at the automatic pilot to see if it held on course and turned inquiringly.

"About the maharajah," Carter said. He turned his head, frowning back in the cabin where the woman sat—Miss Stoddard, whose brother had been kidnapped. Bill felt sorry for Miss Stoddard. He'd given her this lift to Sisajagoor, over Carter's protests.

Bill waited. Looking at the placid triangle of his face, at the mild gray eyes, you forgot the grumble of noise coming from the two wing engines. Bill had that way of making everything seem quiet and orderly and commonplace.

"About the maharajah," Carter repeated. "Pukka prince, that chap, if you follow me. He's a king, Miles." Carter studied Bill to see the effect of his words.

Bill felt vaguely pleased. He'd enjoy

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talking with a king. He'd talked to a president's wife once, on a charter air trip. She was a peach of a sport, though she didn't know beans about engines or airplanes.

"Kings," Carter warned, "have to be treated like kings."

That sounded reasonable to Bill. He didn't carry the thought any further. After all they were just selling an airplane. You ran it through specification tests, gave the buyer some break-in hops and collected your money. What was Carter getting at?

"A king is used to having his own way, used to having everybody agree with him, Miles. Now when you first meet the maharajah . . . Look."

Bill watched, with interest. Carter placed the palms of his hands together as though about to do a high dive. The edges of the hands went against his forehead. Then, in a series of jerks they came down, forehead following until the body was in an abject curve. He dropped on one knee. He stood up, brushing his trouser leg.

"That's the salaam," he stated.

Bill said, diffidently: "Looks like the Big Apple or something."

Carter frowned. "You don't get the idea, Miles. Here in India we show respect to native rulers. When in Rome . . . y'know. It's good business. Mind trying that bow?"

"Sure not," Bill readily agreed. He made a gesture, as though passing something over to Red Johnson, his mechanic, in the right-hand seat. It was the authority of the control cab.

Johnson had been staring forward and down at the tiny arid farms, eight thousand feet below. He nodded at Bill's gesture, leaned over to pick up the course reading. Bill stepped back into the small forward compartment that was intended for cargo or a steward's pantry, according to the purchaser's need.

Considering the bumpy air they were riding through, Bill did a credible imitation of Carter's salaam.

"Now if you want to make a really good impression," Carter further instructed, "you lean forward and pretend you're kissing his pant cuff."

"That's nice," Bill said, scarlet mounting in his face.

Carter smiled. "You'll learn. When in Rome do as the Romans do, eh? And about that Stoddard woman. When we get to Sisajagoor I'll bundle her out of sight. She can stay at the American mission where her brother was before he got himself kidnapped."

CARTER waited for agreement but Bill didn't say anything. He was examining the lever of the emergency 'scape hatch, as though it was something he's noticed for the first time.

"Look here, Miles," Carter warned. "There're lots of things you don't know about this country. One of them is that this Zeniba Tali is related to the maharajah; brother or something. And Zeniba Tali is a rajah himself."

"That means a king, too, sort of?" Bill inquired.

"There are rajahs and rajahs," Carter said, as though Bill wouldn't understand anyway. "But he's related to the maharajah. Remember that, Miles."

"He's a damned kidnapper," Bill said, turning toward the cabin.

Calvert Carter looked surprised. He hadn't thought of Bill as the kind who knew swear words.

The missionary woman looked up at Bill's approach. She didn't seem to see him, though an automatic smile came to her lips. Her washed-blue eyes had a far-seeing quality, the result of a slight muscular unbalance. Bill knew this. A pilot learns a lot about eyes. She wasn't pretty. Her face had the transparent, unhealthy look of too much tropics. But she was nice. Bill thought of her in that way. And she was in trouble.

"He's out there," she said, as though Bill shared her thoughts. She pointed to the west.

"That's all desert country, Miss Stoddard."

"All desert country," she agreed. "One of his donkey boys came back. They want . . . it's five thousand dollars." She paused.

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"But no one trusts the man Zeniba Tali."

Bill leaned his weight on the chair arm across the aisle. "Miss Stoddard, isn't he a brother or something to the maharajah?"

The girl's eyes focussed on him. There was a flicker of amusement in them. "You don't know about the caste system, do you?"

Bill had read about that in the books he'd taken with him on the ocean trip. But he shook his head, waiting.

"Yes," the girl hesitated, "they call it brother-in-law. Don't mention that at Sisajagoor. His Highness would very likely shove a dagger into you."

Bill looked startled. From her that cool statement sounded like a curse word in Sunday school.

She rested her hand on his arm. "You have business with the maharajah. You mustn't be seen talking to me at Sisajagoor."

"Listen, Miss Stoddard," Bill said earnestly, "I talk to anybody I want to."

"Not to a pariah; an outcaste. When in Rome do as the Romans, Mr. Miles. She smiled momentarily. "But thank you for this." Her voice got a little out of control. "It would have taken me so long by ground travel."

Bill walked back to the control cab, embarrassed by her gratitude, feeling more than ever sorry for her.

II

THE airfield, north of Sisajagoor, was smooth and hard as an unclothed table top, and a mile long. Nevertheless Bill made a slow pass over it to check this before landing. Bill was very careful with his flying.

He taxied up to a corrugated iron hangar. There was a small mud-brick house nearby, whitewashed and painfully bright under the glaring Indian sun. But it had a wide veranda that made it look heavenly cool inside.

Natives, in all stages and style of dress, seemed to pop out of the ground. There was a swarm of them about the plane by the time Bill reached the door and stepped down onto the hard red earth of the field. One of them, shouting at the top of his voice, was beating another with a long, bamboo cane.

Bill stood at the cabin entrance and watched this. The beaten one was tall and stalwart, unlike most of the Indians Bill had seen around Calcutta. He had a dignity about him, enhanced by the towering white folds of his turban and gray-streaked, patriarchal beard whose ends were braided. He made not the slightest effort to defend himself, though the man who beat and berated him so furiously was not much more than half his size.

The heat wrapped itself about the flyer, layer on stifling layer. Bill closed his eyes against the glare, but it remained in them and with it the picture of the tall man standing patiently while the other beat him. He could hear the dry *whack* of the bamboo on flesh, the shrill, unintelligible words.

"Stop that, you little monkey!" Bill commanded. He moved unthinkingly and snatched the cane. He brought it down with a sharp whip of his forearm on the small man's head. The man's knee-joints wilted under him.

"Now you've done it," Carter's voice came furiously from behind. "That happens to be one of the maharajah's police."

Bill looked at the cane he still held. "I didn't aim to floor him," he said, after a little time.

Carter pushed him under the shadow of the wing tip. "Stay here, you fool," he commanded. "Don't even *move* until I get rid of that Stoddard woman."

"Sure. Okay," Bill agreed. He tossed the bamboo over where the policeman was getting slowly to his feet.

"*Sahib.*"

The big native stood before him, bowing with all the dignity of a prime minister.

Carter hadn't ordered Bill not to talk. "What was that guy beating you for?"

"I ask for speak with the maharajah but refused that man *dustoorie*. I wish service in the maharajah's guard. I am a Jack

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sepoy, soldier, British Army. I am discharged because I kill a man. The maharajah would want me if I could speak him."

Bill caught at the native word. He was being handed too much at one time. "What's *dustoorie?*"

"The gift . . . a bribe, *sahib.* I am your servant. It is better, *sahib.* If I am your servant you have the right for do what you did. I will draw no pay. You are my father and my mother and the gate to prosperity."

This last startled Bill. He took a little time to digest it. It must mean that the big man was grateful; that as his master Bill would be excused for defending him from the policeman.

"Okay, Jack," Bill agreed. "You're my servant, though I've got no more need of a servant than a dog has fleas."

The man looked slightly puzzled, but bowed assent. *"Sahib,"* he warned, "it is His Highness that comes. The Maharajah of Sisajagoor." He stepped quickly back of the flyer.

Bill found himself alone. The native chatter had ceased, as the noise of a poultry yard becomes dead silence in the presence of a hawk.

A SMALL man advanced toward him, followed by others. He wore a turban with one large red jewel glowing in the folds of cloth. Otherwise he was dressed in plain tropic whites.

The man directly behind him chanted something in a big voice. "Prince Jadsee-ul Gulk Mutrza . . ." it sounded that way to Bill. It went on and on, to an astonishing length. Bill wondered how he could roll out all those words with one breath.

From the jumble of words Bill caught the title "Maharajah." Attention was divided between him and the small man with the jeweled turban. The natives were doing that thing Carter had done; the salaam. Bill felt a tinge of excitement. This man before him was a real, live maharajah!

Red Johnson spoke in a hoarse stage whisper from the window of the control cab. "That's him, Bill! That's his nibs."

Unconsciously Bill wiped his palm dry on the leg of his trousers. He stepped forward, extending it. "I'm Bill Miles, Your Highness," he said.

The small man stopped suddenly as though he had come up against an invisible wall. He had a narrow effeminate face, jet-black, piercing eyes and hawk nose. His lips, showing between mustache and trimmed beard, were a moist red.

His eyes searched Bill's face with minute intentness. The lips widened in a quick, friendly manner. "You know who I am, I believe," he said and extended his hand.

Bill was aware that the natives had stopped salaaming, as though turned suddenly to statues. "Sure. You're the maharajah. Pleased to meet you."

Bill felt somebody poking him savagely from behind and knew that it must be Calvert Carter. Bill didn't know just what to do about introducing a king. Carter was supposed to take care of things like that. Dad Peniston at the factory had said: "You just do us a good job of flying, Bill. Carter'll take care of the pink tea stuff."

"Your Highness," Bill said, "meet Mr. Carter. He's our Calcutta agent."

The Indian bowed slightly. "My minister has corresponded with Mr. Carter," he said, not offering his hand. "You're an American, of course, Mr. Miles. I had two years post-graduate at Harvard."

"Would you care to look the ship over, Your Highness?" Calvert Carter asked, looking mad at Bill.

The Indian waved his hand, quick little side movements, so that the great signet ring twinkled in the sun. "No, no," he said impatiently.

Bill thought: Seventy-five thousand bucks, State-side, and he won't even look at her.

"You'll care for a peg, a drink, Mr. Miles?" the maharajah inquired, motioning toward the neat, whitewashed building.

"Sure," Bill agreed, "if you won't want to fly any today."

"That is for morning. We arise very early here in India, Mr. Miles. I am not a

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good flyer, Mr. Miles. This very hot air has the holes, no?"

"Kinda bumpy." Bill nodded. "Whyn't you just call me Bill, Your Highness? I'm not used to being mistered."

Bill heard a sharp intake of breath and turned to see what had happened to Carter. Carter was making signals to him with his eyes and mouth but Bill couldn't understand what he was getting at.

THEY entered the dim interior of the building. After the glare of sun it required a moment for Bill's eyes to accommodate themselves. "Boy!" he exclaimed, "this is a slick joint. You got an airline stopping here, Your Highness?"

"No, no. My private bar. For myself and guests only. Please to sit down, Bill."

Bill sat down. Lord, this guy must be lousy with jack!

"You'll want a gin drink, Bill? I recommend Mothers' Ruin for this weather."

"Mothers' Ruin is fine," Calvert Carter agreed, tapping Bill's leg meaningly with his foot. "It's my favorite, Your Highness."

Bill said, diffidently: "I'll just take Bourbon, straight, if you got it."

The Indian stared at him. "With the sun still high! No, no."

"High or not," Bill said placidly, "I like Bourbon."

Carter made a disapproving grumble in his throat so Bill knew he'd done something wrong. He hesitated asking the question on his mind. Had Carter found decent transportation for Miss Stoddard? Aside from the prince's Rolls-Royce Bill had seen no cars about the field; nothing but those two-wheeled ox carts where the driver sits on the cart tongue and twists the bulls' tails to make them go.

After two leisurely drinks they rolled to the maharajah's palace in the grand black English car and Bill thought guiltily of Miss Stoddard in the ox cart and he wondered what had happened to his suitcases and to Jack Sepoy who claimed him as his father and mother and the gate to prosperity. India sure was a funny place.

Somehow Jack Sepoy—Bill thought that must his name—had arrived ahead of them and had insinuated himself into the palace as Bill's personal servant. Bill stood for this personal servant business up to the point where Jack tried to hold his trousers for him.

"Now you look here, Jack," he warned, "I've been pullin' my pants on for a good many years. You just sit down over there and tell me about some things."

There was another servant who kept coming in and out of the room, though Bill couldn't see that he was doing anything. Jack faced him with a barrage of Indian words and the man salaamed to Bill and left.

"*Sahib,*" Jack said then, "it is not proper for me to sit down, please. *Dustoor nahin hai.* And the *sahib* must be careful about what his tongue says. Not the boots, please, *sahib*. Slippers must be worn in the palace rooms. *Dustoor hai.*"

"What's that mean, Jack?"

"It means: It is the custom. You will learn that is an important thing in India, *sahib.*"

"Just call me Bill, Jack," Bill requested. "You mean that other fella that was in here would go and blab everything he heard to the maharajah?"

Jack Sepoy allowed himself a dignified smile. "That one could never talk to the maharajah, *sahib*. He talks to another man and that one to another man and it reaches the ears of his highness' bearer and that man talks and the maharajah hears. His highness will know everything you do or say while at Sisajagoor."

"He'd know if I went down to see Miss Stoddard, the missionary woman?"

"That you must not do, *sahib*. Her brother doctored Zeniba Tali."

"And then the darned goat kidnapped him and wants five thousand bucks."

"It is true, *sahib.*"

"The whole thing's screwy to me. You seem to know a lot, Jack."

Jack Sepoy bowed. "I have been Sisajagoor-side three weeks, *sahib*. My ears are keen."

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BILL tried to plaster his cow-lick down in front of a mirror that caved his face in on one side and give him mumps on the other. Carter would skin him alive if he knew about this talk.

"Why would Miss Stoddard call herself an Untouchable?" he asked guardedly. "Or are you like the rest of these Indians? Won't talk about caste."

Jack Sepoy drew himself up proudly. "I am a Sikh. We do not believe in caste. But it is well to respect the beliefs of others, *sahib*. I will tell you a story, *sahib*."

Bill shoved the mosquito net aside and reclined on the bed. "Shoot," he requested, half-closing sun-wearied eyes.

The story, as Jack told it, reminded Bill of an Arabian Nights' tale:

There was once a rajah of Rajput caste, the Sikh told Bill. He was a man of overweening, wicked ambition. He wished to raise himself to the Brahmin caste, the priestly caste. And no man, it is the belief, may raise himself in caste without dying and being reborn, and then it is not certain. By his character this man would have been reborn a dog or a pariah, which is much the same.

But the rajah contrived a clever plan. It must be known that wealth has nothing to do with caste. The rajah purchased a young girl of a wretchedly poor Brahmin caste family and married her with great ceremony.

There came a son from this marriage and the rajah had great feasts to celebrate this birth and he had it said throughout the land that the rajah had a wife of Brahmin caste and a son of high caste. It was a great loss of face to the Brahmins of that district, for the rajah claimed that, because of this, he too was of high caste and he put the sacred cord of a twice-born Brahmin about his neck.

"Fawncy that," Jack Sepoy said. He had lots of English expressions.

Bill waited, drowsily, but that seemed to be the end of the story.

At dinner the maharajah wore narrow-legged native trousers and what appeared to be a short, very fine, linen nightshirt, girdled at the waist by a jeweled dagger belt. Bill looked at the gem-crusted dagger sheath, estimating the length of blade inside, remembering what Miss Stoddard had told him.

After dinner they had nautch girls dance for them. Bill admired the jangling ankle rings tremendously, and said he wished they had a lot of girls like that back home instead of so many fan dancers. The maharajah raised his eyebrows politely at this and seemed to be enjoying some secret joke.

There was a fakir who did a lot of Indian tricks that Bill had already seen in Calcutta. And then two jugglers performed and the oranges they tossed multiplied to thousands before Bill's sleepy eyes.

Bill wondered, in a vague, pleasantly detached way, what Rome had to do with Sisajagoor, and if Zeniba Tali would kill Miss Stoddard's brother and why Miss Stoddard should be a pariah just because her brother had doctored Zeniba Tali. Carter woke him up with a sharp thrust of elbow but not before the prince saw that he was nodding in slumber.

III

BILL found the Maharajah a fairly good pilot. He'd had flying training in London and in the States. His flying reminded Bill of the way a woman flys. He had good hands but was too cautious at times.

After an hour of it, Bill taxied over to the hangar and cut the switches. "Your Highness," he said, "if I told you to fly low, slow and not bank too steep on the turns, what'd you think of that?"

The Indian considered this for a time. "You teach as an Indian *guru*, wise man, would teach, my friend Bill. After this I will take fewer chances by seeming to take greater chances."

"You're not so dumb, Your Highness," Bill complimented him.

This seemed to please the maharajah. He invited Bill on a tour of the palace grounds. Bill saw a bullock cart that looked

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as though it was made of solid gold; a state palanquin one thousand years old; ceremonial elephants whose broad foreheads were painted with strange devices; and horses that could outrun the wind. Bill knew quite a bit about horses—just ordinary horses.

Bill could have ridden one of the sleek, beautiful animals; he could have ridden the prince's own white mount with the dyed mane and tail. The prince urged him to, but Bill shook his head regretfully at sight of the English saddles.

"Gosh, Your Highness, I couldn't enjoy ridin' on one of those postage stamps."

That remark led to talk of saddles and horses. Bill was shown a saddle looking something like a jeweled saw-horse that had belonged to a Moghul prince. It didn't mean much to Bill but pretty soon he found himself speaking unrestrainedly of the West, where he had been born. The maharajah interrupted him at times.

"What's a pin-tail?" he asked.

"That's a . . . I guess you'd call it a mongrel horse. You catch 'em off the range. Some make good cow ponies, though."

The maharajah wanted to know how they caught them. Bill told him all he knew about this and of the stories he'd heard of creasing a wild horse with a rifle bullet and how a man on foot, if he knew his business, could catch the fastest horse that ever ran wild.

"But how, Bill?" There was disbelief in the prince's eyes.

"Keep 'em on the move. Circle them away from water holes. But the thing is you give 'em the feeling they can't get away from bein' caught. Takes a long time, but it's been done. I know it for a fact."

A man approached, salaaming. The maharajah glanced up, eyebrows suddenly stern. Among the Indian words Bill distinctly caught the name "Stoddard." He saw something pass over the ruler's face, as a man who is awakened from pleasant dreams to cold reality. He felt sorry for this Indian prince who owned a string of the finest horses you'd want to see, and ceremonial elephants with solid gold rings on their stumped tusks, and a private saloon. Yes, Bill felt sorry for the Maharajah.

THAT night after dinner Jack Sepoy told Bill that a person wished to speak with him. Who? The Sikh momentarily lost his poise. It was plain that he was acting against better judgment. It was a *mem-sahib;* she demanded the message be delivered.

Bill replaced slippers with flying boots and followed Jack Sepoy out of the palace grounds; through dirty, narrow streets; danger signals talking to the back of his neck. The only woman he knew in Sisajagoor was the missionary lady, whose brother had been kidnapped by the maharajah's relative.

That was what troubled Bill during his talk with Miss Stoddard, and later. It seemed as though he was planning to doublecross the prince. On the other hand, this Zeniba Tali hadn't ought to go around kidnapping people and then, after the ransom was paid, refusing to turn them loose.

It kept Bill awake almost the whole night, thinking it over. If Zeniba Tali hadn't released the missionary immediately he wouldn't do it just because an airplane landed out there for him. He'd be more apt to shoot the maharajah's plane full of holes.

The more he thought of it the more complicated it became, because if what Miss Stoddard said was so, Zeniba Tali had to keep the doc, on account of that tumor operation. He'd never intended releasing him. And you can hunt people and locate them with an airplane. But you can't catch them. Or can you?

Bill scrambled his thoughts up like a deck of cards and read them again. After a long time of this, Bill called Jack Sepoy from his little anteroom and the Sikh found a pencil and some note paper. He told Bill, in different ways, that he was being foolish but despite this he was a big help. The thing that worried Bill most was about the prince.

The next morning Bill asked the prince

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if he could use the airplane. To his astonishment the maharajah indicated no surprise; he refrained from asking the questions that Bill dreaded. "When one hunts," he said, merely, "it is well to have guns. And perhaps extra petrol."

Bill felt like ten kinds of a heel. "Your Highness," he tried to explain, "this ain't the kind of hunting trip you think. It's—"

The maharajah stopped him abruptly, fiercely. "Your needs will be supplied. After that my airfield servants will find duties elsewhere."

Bill didn't know whether the maharajah was mad at him or not. But he sure would be when he learned the use Bill was making of his plane.

Somehow Calvert Carter found out. Maybe Red Johnson told him, because Bill wouldn't let Red go on the trip. Bill doubted this. Old-time mechanics and pilots may squabble among themselves but they stick together against outsiders.

Carter saw Miss Stoddard sitting beside Bill in the cockpit, and Jack Sepoy in a forward seat of the cabin, trying to act as if he weren't scared pink.

"Miles," Carter said, "I absolutely forbid this. I intend cabling Mr. Peniston—"

"Sit down and shut up or get out," Bill said curtly and jazzed his guns so the two double-row radials changed their idling grumble into thunder.

Carter sat down, stiffly erect, two seats back of Jack Sepoy, and clasped the safety belt over his lap.

HE DIDN'T stay there long. When they got aloft, into smoother air, he came forward. "Just what do you intend doing, Miles?"

It was a reasonable question. Carter was their agent here and Dad Peniston had indicated he was to be boss. Only Dad Peniston didn't know that a missionary doctor was going to be kidnapped by a low-down goat who raised his ransom ante after his first demands had been met. Bill pulled the rubber-knobbed dash plug that set the automatic pilot to work and told Carter all about it.

"Miss Stoddard knows about where he is, from the ransom bearer's description. These desert maps ain't much more use to me than a funny paper."

"But what can you do, Miles?"

"I spent almost all last night tryin' to figure that out," Bill admitted. "I've got some notes here that Jack Sepoy had copied into Indian for me."

Carter watched Bill unwrap brightly colored cloth streamers from thick, pulpy native paper that was weighted for drop-message. "This one says about like this," Bill explained: "Any messenger from Zeniba Tali will be shot on sight by British native soldiers. The hawk awaits for Sahib Stoddard. . . . That hawk business was Jack's idea," Bill added modestly.

Calvert Carter shook his head as he would at the madness of any madman. "You'll get Stoddard shot and probably wreck this plane and certainly you'll spoil the sale of it. I told you the maharajah is related to Zeniba Tali."

Bill thought Carter was more than two-thirds right about most of that. "But he won't hurt Doc Stoddard," Bill explained. "The doc cut a tumor from Zeniba Tali's neck that was about to choke him. He'll be afraid to do anything to him until that's pretty well healed."

Bill expected Carter to say something about when in Rome do as the Romans, or something along that usual line. But the agent went back and sat down and looked worried.

They hit rolling, sandy country after they'd crossed over the government canal and pretty soon Bill's map became meaningless except for the conventional waterhole marks. After that Miss Stoddard directed him. She'd been stationed at the Sisajagoor mission four years and had been around a lot on mission work.

At length they found a waterhole, with dull striped tents about it. Miss Stoddard said that was Zeniba Tali's camp. Bill circled at five thousand and gave Jack Sepoy the streamered note to shove out the rear door when he nodded and skidded the ship.

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They watched the leisured descent of the note, streamers fluttering. It seemed to be making wide circles in the air, due to their own circling movement. A horseman galloped toward it and others followed and grouped around him. Finally they returned to the camp.

"Now what are you going to do?" Carter asked.

Bill shoved his landing-gear lever, not answering. There was a faint whine of the motor as the gear extended itself below them.

"Go back and strap yourself down," Bill ordered. He slipped the propellers into emergency low pitch and noise flared out as the motors speeded. He dropped the nose and shoved throttles ahead until the manifold-pressure needle hovered on the danger red.

Miss Stoddard turned a white, questioning face at the thunder of racing engines. Then she stared straight ahead toward the striped tents, her hands clenched in terror as the intervening space closed, as the tents appeared to leap upward at them.

BILL put his weight back on the wheel. It seemed as though the landing gear must have raked the tents. He climbed and turned and repeated the power dive. Two horses were galloping about, riderless. Bill climbed and throttled back to a bare flying speed.

They watched men struggling with stampeded camels. Others, mounted, were trying to catch the two horses. Bill slipped into automatic pilot and waited, engines throttled, while partial order was being restored below.

He dove again, before the tents could be struck or the equipment packed.

This time the camels started off at a clumsy, humping gait, flanked by horsemen. The tents were left behind. Bill climbed, circling.

When the natives headed toward rougher country Bill dove, turning them as a sheep dog turns his herd. This time his wheels were so low that one of the men threw himself in headlong panic from his galloping horse. The others didn't wait for him.

In between dives Carter came forward, trying to dissuade Bill from this mad childishness.

"You're not accomplishing anything, Miles," he pointed out. "Just scaring them a bit. What if you'd have engine trouble?"

"These're pretty good engines," Bill told him. Engine failure was the least of Bill's worries. "I'm about to dive again."

After this dive the camels were abandoned, to run in aimless fright. Seen at an angle they looked like queer little bugs; like spiders with shortened legs.

Once the party of horsemen came to a full stop and a dozen or more of the men could be seen pointing their rifles. Bill put them into fleeing panic with another dive.

"They'll shoot this thing full of holes," Carter predicted, when they were aloft again.

Bill shook his head. "There's only one time they could hit me. When I'm diving on them. They're too busy to shoot, then. With guns like theirs you'd have to lead this ship twenty times its length."

Bill retracted his landing gear and made idle swings about the party, but at any slackening of their pace he dropped like some huge, thundering hawk.

He had altitude when the engines stopped. If he had been low in one of the dives, it would have meant an immediate, forced landing and, in this unlevel terrain, a crash.

The left engine stopped first, coughing, sputtering for a brief space then windmilling over slowly from the air pressure against the propeller. The right engine followed immediately. Silence closed on them —a hateful, ominous thing to the pilot. Bill heard Miss Stoddard's voice, caught some of the words. She was praying.

His right hand explored the positions of throttles and altitude levers. He had been shifting them from conventional to emergency settings to give all the frightening sound effects that an experienced pilot can get out of engines, short of a backfire

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through blower sections. He swept the country below for flat, clear land.

Somehow those silent engines made the desert seem more vast, more forbiddingly desolate. He had four thousand feet. With his present loading he estimated that would give him a five-mile gliding radius. Five miles! It wouldn't take Zeniba Tali and his gang long to hunt them out.

They had firearms—two express rifles sent out from the maharajah's game-room collection, and plenty of ammunition. But they would be outnumbered ten to one. The plane would furnish them no protection from gunfire. The metal skin wouldn't stop even an old muzzle-loader ball.

In an emergency, time stretches like a rubber band. These thoughts had come in split seconds. His eyes swept the instrument panel. It was fuel trouble, of course. Ignition stoppage would have sounded entirely different.

His fuel pressure was zero. He was on the belly tank, their main store of gasoline, which still should be more than two-thirds full. The fuel pressure supply came from duplicate engine pumps. If those lines were plugged or broken a shift to a wing tank wouldn't help. Nevertheless he shifted as a test. He worked the primer; shot jets of gasoline to cylinder heads.

The fuel pressure built up immediately. The right engine came to life, yawing the plane around before he could stop it with the rudder. The left engine fired and he felt a reassuring pressure on the control wheel.

But Bill wasn't very happy. He checked the float gauge on the floor board. Zero. His main fuel supply had somehow disappeared.

Bill wiped the moist palms of his hands. The ground party had slowed to a fast walk. Bill checked his map. He estimated they were nearly thirty miles from the waterhole. He had kept Zeniba Tali's party to a stiff gallop most of the time.

There was another waterhole shown about fifty miles to the southwest. He made another dive to stampede the weary animals, and then turned and flew northward. They landed on a flat, open stretch, forty miles from Zeniba Tali. It was getting near sunset. . . .

IV

BILL woke up in the dark cabin. He had been hugging himself, as though warmth was a thing that might be clasped and held to his body. He tried to cover himself more fully with the seat cushions. They had brought plenty of food and water, but had forgotten blankets. An Indian desert is as cold at night as it is hot in the daytime.

Bill had given one of the canvas motor covers to Miss Stoddard. Carter had the other one. Jack Sepoy sat crosslegged in the rear part of the cabin, leaning back with apparent comfort against the bulkhead. He had refused the offer of seat cushions.

"So they couldn't possibly hit us," Carter spoke from behind.

Bill remained silent. Both their wing tanks were full but they had used up all the five-gallon tins of gasoline the maharajah had had stored in the forward and after freight compartments.

"Aren't you awake, Miles?"

"Don't talk so loud," Bill warned. "That was a chance shot. Of all the thousand places they could have hit without doing harm, they had to plug the belly tank."

"I'm awake," Miss Stoddard said, welcoming the sound of voices.

Jack Sepoy's voice came from the rear: "Does the *sahib* wish anything?"

Bill glanced at his watch. "How soon till morning, Jack?"

"Very soon, *sahib*. I smell it."

Bill sniffed the air. "Your smeller's better than mine, Jack. We might as well eat."

"And then go back to Sisajagoor," Carter added, hopefully.

Bill made no answer.

"Listen, Miles," Carter pleaded. "Those are desert men. They can keep you circling around until Hell freezes. . . . I beg your pardon, Miss Stoddard."

"It will take a long time for Hell to

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freeze over, if that's what you were going to say." Miss Stoddard laughed, first with amusement and then with a thin, rising note that brought Bill out of his seat.

"Stop that," he ordered roughly. "Stop that or I'll slap you down!"

Startled silence. Then, meekly: "Thanks, Mr. Miles. I won't get hysterical."

"And I was to get five percent," Carter mourned, "almost four thousand dollars. You're going to lose a flying job, Miles."

"It'll be the first time," Bill replied, untroubled by that.

"I wouldn't be surprised if His Highness meets you with a gang of soldiers. Or perhaps he'll do it in a more quiet manner. You're not out of India yet, Miles."

"I hate making the prince look like a dummy. He's a real gent."

"Perhaps. But dangerous, Miles. He would handle you quickly." It was light enough now so Bill could see the significant movement of Carter's finger across his throat.

THE end of it all, Bill thought afterward, was as tame as a routine flight. They flew up to meet the sun and intercepted Zeniba Tali's party a few miles south of the waterhole. The horses' heads drooped down until their noses seemed to drag the sand.

Bill dove on them, propellers flattened to roaring pitch. He circled. One of the horses was down, kicking feebly. A white garment was waved in a frantic manner and then, under the directions of a man in white topee, was spread flat on the sand. Jack Sepoy waited for Bill's nod; shoved a streamered note from the rear door.

Bill landed on the nearest flat stretch and they waited for hours, wrapped about by the almost insufferable heat. Twice Bill took off to watch the slow progress of three horsemen moving across the sand, and to see that the main body remained away from the waterhole. Jack Sepoy had injected the mysticism of the East into that last note. The hawk was still watching the natives and disobedience would bring complete annihilation.

Bill knew from reading his books that a maharajah ranked a rajah, but he had thought of this Zeniba Tali as a sort of wild, fierce tribesman. The shifty-eyed character who surrendered to them and the runty, filthy companion who accompanied him and Doctor Stoddard shook Bill's faith in all the moving pictures he had ever seen. It was shocking to think of this man being related in any manner to the splendid, intelligent Maharajah of Sisajagoor.

The meeting between Doctor Stoddard and his sister was restrained. Almost painfully so. Stoddard was a frail little man with his sister's pale eyes and with thinning, mousy hair.

"Hello, Anne. It's nice to see you."

"Are you all right, Brian?"

"Very tired. Very. You almost killed our horses yesterday. Poor brutes were lathered white."

"I think that was the plan. You're thirsty?"

"Almost choking. They drank the last of the water, thinking we would get back to the spring."

Miss Stoddard smiled faintly, watching her brother drink. "I think that was the plan, too. Mr. Miles does things in an unusual way. But he gets results. Did you bring the ransom money? It was given by friends, Brian."

"In our saddle-bags. All of it."

"Then we'll just take it and turn these goats loose," Bill decided. "And let the rest of the gang know we're through bothering 'em."

Doctor Stoddard shook his head. Bill saw that he had that unbreakable stubborness that small, frail men sometimes have. "His wound is infected," Stoddard said. "We'll have to take him back to the mission hospital, until he's well enough for a British prison."

"Look, Doc," Bill complained, "I'm in bad enough with his brother-in-law already. Puttin' him in the hoosegow'll be an awful knock to the maharajah."

"He can't stay here without proper medical attention. He'd die."

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"An' a good thing if he did," Bill said warmly. "The louse looks well enough to me. Bet he didn't go without drinkin' water yesterday or last night."

"He's all right now. But I must watch that infection."

"Okay," Bill agreed finally, realizing the futility of argument. "Come on, Jack, we'll unsaddle the nags and turn 'em loose."

Bill walked past Zeniba Tali, not seeing the other's hand concealed under a fold of his loose garment, nor the blood-hungry look on that stupid face.

BILL felt sorry for the Indian's horse. It stood with feet braced wide apart, head drooping from weariness. And its belly and flanks were welted, still oozing blood from the cruel spurs. But he knew that once loose the horse would find its way to water and forage. Bill knew a lot about horses.

The prince hadn't believed his story about a man being able to walk a horse down, by keeping it away from waterholes. . . . Zeniba Tali was moving toward him; a funny crouching sort of walk. Bill didn't notice his walk.

"That's all right," Bill told him, "I'll take care of the nag."

But Bill was pretty sure that in the end the maharajah had believed his story about walking a horse down, even if it did sound like a whopper. Somehow the prince seemed to have a lot of confidence in him. That's what made this whole thing so bad.

Taking his airplane out this way was almost like stealing from a buddy. At the same time Bill couldn't understand how this stinking kidnapper could be related to a man like the prince.

Bill walked around to the left side of the horse, threw the stirrup over his saddle. He grumbled over the cinch knot. These Indians could learn a lot about horses and saddles.

Miss Stoddard's scream was like a file edge run down his backbone:

"He's got a knife! Watch out!"

Bill glanced up. For a moment he thought she had cried the warning to Jack Sepoy. Zeniba Tali's man had a knife, all right. They should have frisked them for weapons, first thing they did. But Jack had a knife, too. A long thing, with a funny curve to it. The desert man didn't seem to like the looks of that knife. He turned and made a running jump onto the back of a horse, jabbing his own knife into the beast's rump to speed its departure.

"Bill Miles, he'll kill you!"

Not until then did Bill recognize his own danger. Zeniba Tali had circled the horse. He held a knife in his right hand, slowly advancing; held it shoulder high for a down-slashing stroke.

Bill didn't see a chance for himself. Stoddard and his sister stood like two frightened, helpless children, screaming their warnings.

Jack Sepoy had chased his man a short distance, even after the other had gotten mounted. Before he could get back Bill Miles would be a dead man.

Bill moved slowly backward, trying to catch Tali's eyes. The other was drooling words of his own language, words of hate and triumph.

Bill circled the horse, moving backward step by step, trying to gauge when the other would leap on him. Tali seemed to be enjoying this brief cat-and-mouse business.

It was much the same as a fist fight with an untrained man. The Indian's eyes telegraphed a warning before he leaped. Bill dove under the horse just a split-second ahead of the sharp steel.

Bill had stood for too much during the last couple of days. Really angry, he flung the full weight of his body against the weary, sagging horse.

The horse fell sidewise, with a short grunt of protest. His weight struck Zeniba Tali, knocking him over, prisoning his feet and legs for a moment.

THAT was all Bill needed. He cleared the horse with one leap. Bill was really mad. He kicked out savagely. The Indian shrieked with pain over his broken wrist, his eyes following the short arc of his kicked knife.

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Bill jerked Zeniba Tali to his feet with ungentle hands.

"Watch out for his bandages!" Stoddard cried.

Bill's hard right fist went back and forward, like a piston stroke. After that Zeniba Tali's face was not a pleasant thing to look at.

Bill dropped the man. His hand felt greasy from the contact. Something had parted from Zeniba Tali's neck. It was filthy dirty, a string of some kind, with curious knots in it.

Jack Sepoy had returned. He saw what Bill held. His hand came up to his bearded mouth. Bill was astonished at what he saw for a fleeting moment in his friend's face—a look of awed fear, fear of things unknown and unknowable. It was there and gone in an instant.

"Now you *have* done it!" Carter shouted angrily, stepping out of the Waldoon's cabin.

The anger left Bill. He stood looking at the mutilated face of the Indian. "Yeah," he admitted. "Looks like I have."

He knew how he'd feel if some guy from a foreign country smashed his brother in the face like that. And it must be even worse, seeing that this man was sort of a king and his brother . . . well, the maharajah was big potatoes in this country.

It didn't seem to Bill that it did any good talking about the matter. But Calvert Carter wouldn't let it rest. He rode in the co-pilot seat on the way back to Sisajagoor, just so he could tell Bill how impossible everything was.

"And won't it be nice," he jeered, "when you land on the maharajah's field and he sees what you did for his brother?"

Bill could understand how that would shame the maharajah. He just couldn't bring himself to do a thing like that. He circled in the vicinity of the American mission, picked out a strip of smooth ground to the west of it, and landed. A short walk wouldn't hurt Zeniba Tali.

He waved the Stoddards' gratitude aside. He would have expected the same favor from them under reversed circumstances. It was just his hard luck that this goat of a Tali had to be related to the prince.

Calvert Carter got out with the others. "It's been so good knowing you, Mr. William Miles," he sneered. "I'm going to wire all the details of this to Mr. Peniston as soon as I reach Calcutta; wire them collect, along with my resignation as his agent."

"Hey!" Bill protested, "you got a four-thousand-dollar commission comin' when we—if we sell this—"

Carter gave him a mock bow. "Sorry I won't be able to attend your funeral. Wonder what it'll be—a dagger in the back, or just plain garroting?"

"It won't be a dagger in the back," Bill told him with assurance. "The prince ain't that sort of guy."

And then, to make an impossible situation even worse, Bill blew a tire, landing on the maharajah's field.

THERE was no reason for it blowing. The casing hadn't touched ground a dozen times. And Bill set the Waldoon's wheels down with his customary light-as-a-feather technique.

It went out with a shotgun explosion and for a few minutes Bill thought the Waldoon was going to wind itself into a knot.

It was the right tire. The big doughnut of rubber went slack while he still had forty or fifty miles of landing speed and it got jerked crossways of the wheel.

He caught the resulting groundloop instantly, with a full burst of the right engine and kept reduced power on that side, with left brake hard on. Even though speed gradually slackened that gunning used up runway fast.

At the last moment, just before he would have run into the guest house, he jerked back on the throttle and let her do a partial groundloop. It came to a swaying stop, at right angles to the direction of landing.

There was no harm done the plane but Bill knew, from poorly concealed smiles of the attendants, that his reputation had suffered. He had lost considerable face.

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The prince wasn't there, but he had his car waiting at the field. Bill wrote a telegram to the Calcutta agency, ordering a new casing, and sent Jack off with it.

The maharajah was waiting for Bill at the palace. There was something funny about the way he looked at him, as though he already had some word of what had happened. He dismissed the servants and the guard who always stood just outside the door.

He took one of the long, slender cigarettes that bore his seal in goldleaf and had mouthpieces of the same metal. He motioned to the humidor. Bill shook his head; took an American cigarette from a crumpled package.

The maharajah blew a thin ribbon of smoke from his mouth. "The hunting was good?" he inquired, politely. There was something back of the cool voice that put Bill on his guard. Somehow that small, slender, erect body made Bill think of sharp, finely tempered steel.

"Did you kill . . . any game?" the prince added.

"No," Bill said. "I didn't kill him. But we might just as well be honest with each other. I know about you and him."

The prince's eyes had widened for an instant. But now they were cold, narrow slits. "What . . . *did* . . . you . . . do?"

Each word was distinct, deadly.

Bill swallowed. "I socked him in the puss. He had it comin' to him, Your Highness."

"You . . . *struck him?*"

Bill nodded mutely.

The cigarette was dashed to the floor. The maharajah clapped his hands sharply for a servant. Bill left his presence, shocked by the terrible anger that he had seen flame into the other's eyes.

V

EARLY the next morning the maharajah's minister of finance, a small, oily faced little Burmanese, came to Bill. He was accompanied by a servant, a big man who topped him by many inches. The servant had a small silver tray and on this a check, payment in full for the Waldoon.

"You will take it away," the Burmanese lisped, "as soon as you have received the necessary repairs. That is His Highness' command."

"Take it away!" Bill exclaimed. "But this check pays for it!"

"That is His Highness' wish. He could not touch anything you have touched."

That hurt Bill as much as any knife stab. "I'm goin' to see the prince about this," he decided.

The Burmanese shook his head, an oily, contemptuous smile on his lips. "The maharajah's face is turned from you. You have defiled his presence and his house."

Bill tore the check into shreds, furious. "Then I'll get outta his joint."

The Burmanese looked troubled. "That would further injure his Highness. There would be more gossip. His highness would be forced to . . . end that." He emphasized the last words, hand dropping to his dagger pommel.

Bill stepped suddenly forward, grabbed the small man's shoulders and jerked him up off the floor, holding him for a moment. Jack Sepoy appeared as though from thin air. His long, curved knife was out, lightly pressed to the other servant's chest.

"Get this," Bill said, his scowling face threatening the other, "I'll stay on here at the palace, just to keep from messin' things up any more'n I have. But if any of you gents try stickin' a knife into me, you'll get the damndest beatin' you ever dreamed of. Knives make me mad. And I mean *mad.*"

With that warning he sent the little Indian in a sprawling heap down the polished floor of the corridor.

Bill was seldom angered as he was right then. His mind had a singularly childish quality of accepting others at their face value, of liking them and wanting them to like him. To be avoided, ostracized like a cheating thief and finally, to be threatened, made him rage.

He left the palace, trying to walk this poisoning emotion out of his system. He returned, hours later, his clothes sodden

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with perspiration, his head throbbing as though devils were in there working on it with trip hammers. He was no longer angry, but he was very near to having a sunstroke.

Half dazed, he lay on the bed while Jack Sepoy worked over him with cool, wet cloths about his wrists and on his neck and back. The man's fingers were strong and cunning, kneading his body, relieving the shock of that blazing heat.

As he worked Jack Sepoy talked in a gentle, soothing voice: "The maharajah does not understand, *sahib*. He thinks that you struck his brother."

Bill was almost sobbing. "That's the hell of it, Jack. I did sock his brother. You saw it yourself."

"The maharajah does not understand," Jack persisted.

Bill went to sleep under those quieting words. It seemed to him that Jack Sepoy told him something else—something about a cord.

THAT must have remained very clearly in the subconscious part of his mind. For the next evening while he walked about the native quarter of the city, that one word, emerging from the high, shrill cackle of shopkeepers, beggars, camel drivers, fakirs, brought him instantly alert.

"Cord, *sahib*. You have the cord?"

"Cord?" Bill said, and came to an abrupt stop. He knew that this incredibly skinny, filthy one had been tagging along beside him for some time. At first he had thought it was one of the maharajah's men. He was perfectly aware that every movement he made was under observation, that there was another man trailing him a little distance behind. But he knew also that Jack Sepoy was trailing that one.

"The cord, *sahib*. Zeniba Tali pays you well for it. What you tell me, *sahib?*"

"You mean that dirty string I got off of Tali?" he asked. There certainly was no accounting for the tastes of these people. "Heck, you don't have to pay me anything. I'll give it to you."

He fumbled in his coat pocket, then remembered leaving it in the soiled coat worn the previous day. This moment's delay brought a suspicion to his mind. "How do I know you're from Zeniba Tali?" he demanded.

"He pays you well, *sahib*. How much you say?"

"I don't want anything," Bill again assured him. "Only you got to bring me a note from him. Have the mission lady write it, see."

The man hesitated. "It would be enough if she wrote only that you were to return what you have taken from my master?"

"Sure," Bill agreed, more mystified than ever. "That's the only thing I got off the stinkin' goat. You bring note to maharajah's palace, you get the string. Savvy?"

The man bowed deeply. There was a leering craftiness about him that Bill didn't like. "You are my father and mother and the gate to prosperity," he said. "You will meet me with it at the little gate in the south wall? At ten o'clock, *sahib?*"

That was the gate facing Bill's windows. "You mean the one with the trellis?" Bill gestured with his hands, "that one with flowers growing over it?"

Again the man bowed and leered. "You are my father and—"

"Say that again," Bill threatened, "and I'll boot you where it'll do the most good."

Bill watched his trotting walk as he merged with the ragged, colorful swarm. Tali was certainly going to a lot of trouble to get that dirty, knotted string.

Bill didn't say anything to Jack Sepoy about the cord, or about Zeniba Tali. When he got back to the palace Jack was sitting cross-legged in the little ante-room, studiously whetting the keen edge of his queerly shaped knife. He was trying to convey the impression that he had been sitting there all evening; that he hadn't trailed Bill, ready to use that knife.

Bill didn't like being treated as though he were a foolish, helpless child. So, after closing the bedroom door, he pulled his flying boots, letting them drop noisily on the tiled floor, and made other sounds that a man usually makes on retiring.

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With his light off he lay on the bed for a time, staring through the french windows at the moonlit garden. The time of the rains was nearing, with fat, greasy clouds splotching the sky, so that at intervals the moon was completely obscured. It gave a queer effect of sudden light, the more brilliant because of the impenetrable darkness that followed.

From some place not far away came one of the plaintive, five-note songs of India, sung in the customary nasal whine accompanied by a stringed instrument.

Bill wondered about this queer, ancient, funny land that seemed to have two lives; the one exposed to Occidental curiosity, and the real life of inscrutable mystery, of thoughts and customs centuries old. This caste system, for instance. . . .

VI

BILL sat up, blinking his eyes. He had drowsed off to sleep. He held his wristwatch so the moonlight would fall on it and saw that he still had time to keep his appointment with Zeniba Tali's agent. Very quietly he slipped into his flying boots.

There was some trouble getting the screen opened without making the small noises that he knew would awaken Jack Sepoy. That big Sikh had the hearing and the alertness of a cat.

He slipped out on tiptoe and was halfway across the garden before remembering that the cord Zeniba Tali prized so highly was still in his other jacket. His return for this was hampered by a heavy cloud drifting over the moon. The sudden change was like going from daylight into midnight darkness.

It was even worse, on the return trip, under the shadow of the rose trellis. And it was here that he got his first inkling that this venture might be dangerous.

The sound outside the thick wall was so faint that he might have imagined it—a thud, a faint, wheezing gurgle. That was all.

The door in the outer wall swung open, creaking a little on rusted hinges. There was a pause; silence. But not quite silence, or perhaps it was an animal sixth sense warning Bill that more than one man had come to get that piece of string.

Then he smelled them; the reek of unclean bodies, the indefinable smoky odor of the East. He stepped back hurriedly, to get clear of the shadowing rose trellis.

There was a sharp, stinging pain in his hip. Somebody had jabbed him with a knife. And they hadn't been very careful about the depth of penetration.

"What's goin' on here?" Bill demanded.

The answer came in a subdued whisper: "If you have value of your life, you American pig, you will remain quiet!"

Bill Miles was a normal, healthy young animal and as such wanted to continue living. He dropped his own voice to a whisper: "Call your dogs off or you never will get this string."

"So . . . you did not give it to the maharajah?"

"Why in thunder would I give it to the prince?"

"The maharajah thinks that Zeniba Tali still wears this cord? That he fell at your hands while . . . !"

"Aihee! Aihee!" Another voice broke in. "This is a thing to be told in the market places. A twice-born struck by—"

"Silence! We must be sure that no other person of consequence knows of this."

Bill Miles realized he should have listened more closely to the wisdom of Jack Sepoy. There was his queer story about a man buying and marrying a high-caste girl, making himself a Brahmin, disgracing all others of that caste. That would be Zeniba Tali. But it seemed that as long as he wore this cord thing, none of them dared . . .

"The cord, you fool!" one of them hissed.

Bill kept his voice to a quiet undertone. "You might as well know that I have that string of Tali's in my mouth. Start something an' I'm goin' to swallow it."

Bill wouldn't have put the thing in his mouth, or swallowed it, for all the rubies in the maharajah's collection.

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The Indians made no answer to this. Bill knew very well the reason. From the first they had planned to take him as well as that idiotic cord. If it was in his pocket, very well. If in his stomach, the removal of it might be a painful but not difficult operation. At this instant the moon came to his rescue.

The only noticeable effect was to make the garden a luminous silvery white, reflected to show him five men, all of them with knives drawn.

But Miles hadn't been merely threatening when he told the Burmanese that knives made him mad. Knives or razors. The sight of them conveyed to him a very real sensation of what they could do.

WITHOUT the slightest vestige of a fight plan, Bill ducked and plunged. His head struck the leader amidships. There was a deep, gusty moan of pain.

Bill, full length on the ground, twisted sidewise, knees drawn up to protect his stomach. There were faces with staring, hating eyes. He straightened both legs, with good aim. He felt the hard leather heels of his flying boots strike the tender flesh and muscle of those faces.

He squirmed from under their fallen bodies. It seemed that one of the others had a white-hot iron. At least that was the sensation as it burned down his arm to the elbow.

According to Bill's count there should have been only two of them left. But perhaps another man was posted outside the wall as a guard, to take the place of the maharajah's sentinel, who had been backstabbed before they could open the gate.

Three men with knives against one man who had nothing but his fists. And Bill could not make a surprise attack again. Those three boys were ganging up, getting ready for a grand blood-letting.

Bill was on his feet, half erect, when they rushed him. He clutched one of the fallen men with both hands.

As they leaped for him he raised the body as a shield and braced against the force of their rush. He tried to whirl, to use the body as a club. But a hundred and fifty pounds of limp flesh isn't an easy thing to handle.

He had avoided their knives that time. But now they had wisely scattered, surrounding him.

One man was advancing on him from in front. There was no time for learning where the other two were. He might feel their knives in his back at any moment.

Bill crouched for a split-second. Technically there was only one direction of safety. That was up. And that was where he went, just as hard and fast as the tight muscles of his legs would propel him. And as he sprang upward he lifted both hands to grab for the rose trellis.

There was a rending crash. After that there were four men struggling under a tangled heap of flimsy wood and sharp rose thorns.

Now the advantages were all on Bill's side. No matter whom he kicked, struck, gouged or strangled, it was bound to be an enemy. And for the next couple of minutes Bill was a very busy man.

He crawled out of the tangle on hands and knees and crouched in that manner, staring at the maharajah who faced him in the bright moonlight, backed by at least twenty armed men of his household.

ONE of Bill's assailants shoved his way into the clear, knife ready. The prince spoke in a cool voice, restraining his men. Skilfully, and with a sort of bored nonchalance, he drew his jeweled dagger, parried the other's blow and sunk the dainty sliver of steel to the hilt in the man's neck. He removed it, flung it disdainfully away.

Bill saw Jack Sepoy, with four men closely around him, like cops guarding a Public Enemy. Bill thought this as good a time as any to have a showdown.

"Prince," he said, pointing, "if them guys don't let him go there'll be another battle around here."

The prince gestured imperially and Jack Sepoy was a free man. "His rashness," the prince explained, "would have spoiled everything. But it required the strength of

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four of my best men to keep him quiet. He is a man I will have for my own bodyguard, if you will sell him."

So the prince had been standing there with his men, observing all this. Probably the man who had trailed Bill earlier in the evening overheard and reported his conversation with Zeniba Tali's man. That piece of string meant a lot to the maharajah. That's why he had let Bill have the airplane; had furnished him with guns and extra petrol.

Obeying a sign from the prince, Bill followed him into the palace and to a room that he had never seen before.

The maharajah selected one of his long, slender cigarettes from a box, whose cover was a priceless jade mosaic. He extended the box and this time Bill took one of them.

"You will be seated?" the maharajah invited.

Bill shook his head. "I just want to tell you, Prince, that I'm sorry about all the darned fool things I've done, and I'm sorry about that ruckus out there. I just don't savvy what—"

The other's hand was extended. "The cord!"

Bill fumbled in his pocket, dropped it in the waiting palm. He stood uneasily while the other examined the queer thing.

"Zeniba Tali," the maharajah said, as though speaking to himself, "by your stolen wealth and by the trickery of knavish officials and infidels you circled your filthy neck with this sacred cord of a twice-born Brahmin.

"You became my brother in the priestly caste and as such you were beyond my vengeance. But you lost the cord, Zeniba Tali, and you will be dead before the sun again rises in the east."

His brown, long-fingered hand closed over the cord with a gesture of finality and Bill Miles knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that Zeniba Tali was as good as dead.

The prince looked up, his eyes grave and stern. They softened and a smile moved his bearded lips. "And I thought you had failed me!"

The smile broadened. He waved the cigarette. "Come! Come! Is this the way friends should be with each other? You will stay and teach me more of flying. We'll hunt tigers together, eh?"

Bill had learned to be wary of what he said in this man's country. "Four-legged tigers?" he cautiously inquired.

The prince had stepped to the servants' bell cord. He turned, laughter in his chest. "Yes. Four-legged tigers this time, Bill. And now we will have a drink, no? Some Spanish brandy, instilled with the flavor of centuries—a drink to make your heart sing."

"I'll just take Bourbon, if you got it handy," Bill decided.

The servant was there, bowing.

The prince hesitated only an instant. Then: "Two Bourbons," he commanded.

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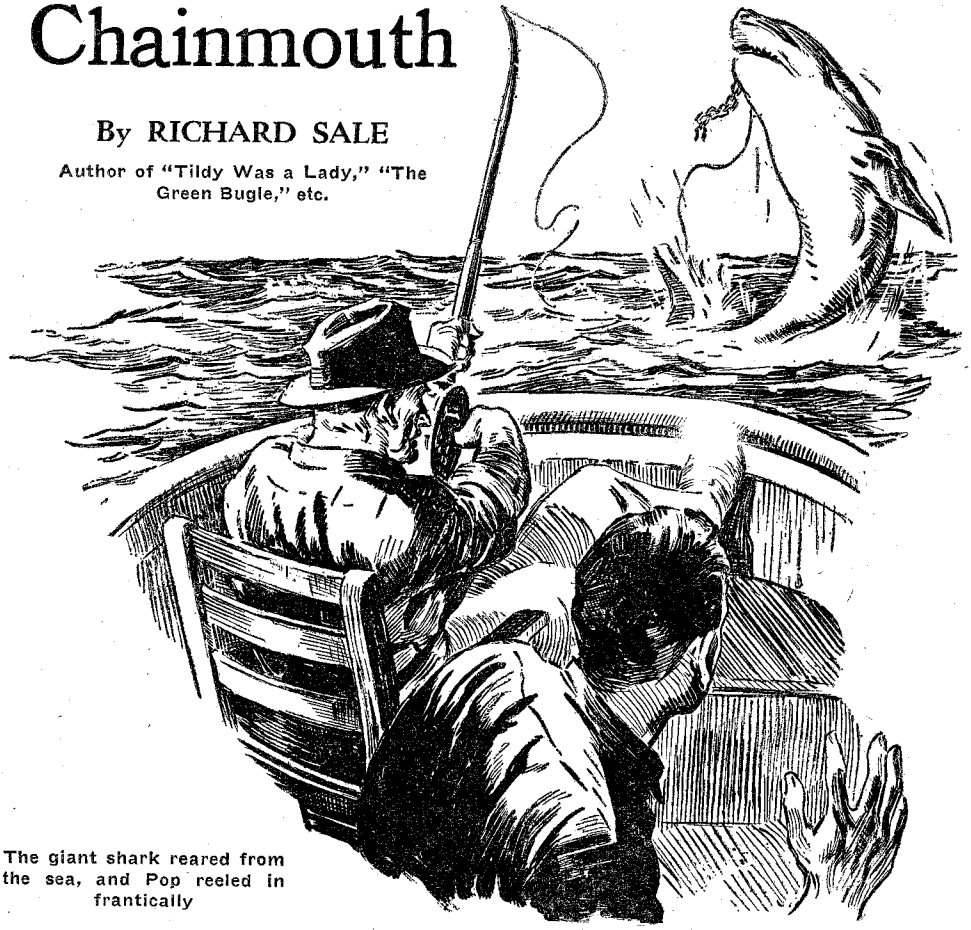
Old Chainmouth

By RICHARD SALE

Author of "Tildy Was a Lady," "The Green Bugle," etc.



The giant shark reared from the sea, and Pop reeled in frantically

You remember Pop, whose best friend is Tildy the porpoise. Well, you'll want to read how Pop went a-fishing, to prove himself a youngster—and to bring home a half-ton legend

POP SHANNON tossed a mullet into the air, and before it had struck the water, Matilda reared out of the pool on her wobbling tail, poised there dynamically for a few seconds as she caught the fish, and then she sank back into the water with a terrific splash, leaving the surface foaming where she had been.

Matilda was the porpoise, Pop's favorite of the whole finny clan which lived in the cup of waterfilled concrete known throughout Florida and the rest of the country as the Underwater Zoo, the only thing of its kind in the world.

Oh, there were aquariums in London and New York, and doubtless in many other places, but they weren't the same thing. You had only to drive down Highway 42 between Miami and Key West, stopping off at Laconia to see the costly miracle,

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and you would know at once that an aquarium simply wasn't in it.

Aquariums are where you put fish in a glass cage, each species separated from the other, which saves the wear and tear of replacement. In the Underwater Zoo the species were all put together so Man could study them and their habits as they really lived, fighting for survival.

The Underwater Zoo was shaped like an egg, and in the vortex the fish swam in a huge tank some thirty-five feet deep. The entire circular wall of the building was lined at various intervals with balconies, before which, in the concrete, were portholes, large enough to accommodate three people at a time. You could stand there and look in upon another world.

It was a green soft world in which nothing seemed to hurry. Even the small fry made no great haste, it seemed, in attempting to elude the omnivorous bluefish. You could watch the bluefish gorge himself on silvery smelts. You could see the ominous dark shadow of the manta as he flapped past, overhead, like a gray kite.

Sometimes Pop Shannon would make the rounds of the balconies while the guests of the Underwater Zoo peered through the portholes. Pop was fifty-six, his hair silvery gray, his face lined and weather-beaten. But he was not an old man. Not in the slightest. His was a young body, hard, lithe, and agile. His body had forgotten to grow old with the years because it had enjoyed the use he put it to.

Before the directors of the Underwater Zoo put him on the payroll, Pop Shannon had sailed the seas from Key West to Louisburg, N. S., in search of fish. Down by the causeway between Miami Beach and Miami, where the charter boats came in to dock at night, you could hear them talk about him, Pop Shannon, the guy who could follow the fish and bring them back to gaff.

The directors of the Underwater Zoo were John Anderson, who was worth thirteen million dollars, and Michael Descort, a wealthy young sportsman. They had got the idea for the Zoo from something Pop Shannon said one day when they were all fishing off the *Big Hook* in the Gulf Stream.

"Y'know," Pop had said as he held the bill of a sailfish, "it'd be kinda something, wouldn't it, if you could see all these dog-gone fish together in a big tank just like they was living and dying in the ocean. I'll bet we'd sure learn about fish from seeing something like that."

That was the remark responsible for the miracle in concrete on highway 42 at Laconia.

TILDY, the porpoise, had had a baby, and he wasn't any midget. Pop Shannon, sitting on the rim of the tank feeding mullets to both mother and son—no one knew whether it was really a son—marveled at Jupiter, which was the youngster's name. He was the size of an average man now and weighed as much, around one hundred and fifty pounds. And he was twice as playful as Tildy, butting her and ramming her unmercifully.

Young Sherman came out of the administration building and walked around the pool to where Pop sat tossing the bright mullets. "Pop!" he called.

"What is it, youngster?" Pop Shannon said. "You look kinda unhappy about something."

The "youngster" was thirty years old, a dark haired, strong-jawed man with candid eyes and a fine smile. "There's a letter from the bosses," Sherman said. "For you. Dr. Bisbee has it, and I think we're in for some work."

"Work?" said Pop Shannon lazily. "What kind of work?"

"You go see," said Sherman. "Bisbee is waiting for you. I'll finish the mullets. Lord, look at that young lightning come out of the water! You'd think he'd never been fed!"

Pop chuckled as he watched the smaller porpoise. "He's right playful, Jupiter is. He had a fight with the sand shark this morning. He winded up by slamming the shark against the wreck. A porpoise is closer to a torpedo than anything I know,

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eh? He hits at seventy miles an hour, and that's somethin'. I'll go see Bisbee."

He sauntered away from the pool and went to the administration office. Inside he found Dr. Bisbee at the desk.

Dr. Bisbee was older than Pop, and much more dignified. He was the curator of the entire fish collection, but being close to seventy, he let the active work fall to young Sherman; he operated in an advisory capacity.

Pop Shannon said, with respect, "Mornin', Doc. Wally said you had some work for me." He grinned.

"Work for you?" Dr. Bisbee said slowly, peering over the rim of his spectacles. "Well—ah—not exactly, Pop. I'm afraid Wallace misunderstood. I told him that we needed a shark."

"Well?" Pop said. "Ain't that work?"

"He assumed I meant for you to catch the shark," Dr. Bisbee said. "But he was mistaken. However we *do* need a shark, Pop. It was all very well for you to kill that mako when the porpoise had her birth, and mind you, Pop, I'm not criticizing you in any way."

Pop nodded, puzzled. "But this ain't gettin' us onto the subject of a new shark, Doc. You said—"

"I know," sighed Dr. Bisbee. He took a long breath. "I had a letter from the owners of the Underwater Zoo, Pop. This morning. Messrs. Descort and Anderson think that the collection would be enriched with the addition of a fine mako. They mention herein that there have been complaints because the only sharks we have are nurse and sand sharks." He sighed again. "Really, Pop, that was an excellent specimen of mako that you killed. There'll be trouble before we find one like it again."

"Oh hell's bells," Pop Shannon grunted. "The ocean is fulla makos in their prime. And while we're about it, we oughta pick up a hammerhead and maybe a great white shark."

"Yes," Dr. Bisbee said. "We'll have all breeds eventually. But Mr. Descort seemed to think the mako came first, so he wrote to tell me—"

Pop rubbed his hands and grinned. "Fine, Doc. Do we go off tomorrow and bring him back alive?"

Dr. Bisbee looked miserable. "As a matter of fact, Pop—it's very difficult—but you aren't to do the catching—"

Pop Shannon gaped. "*I* ain't to do it?"

"Wait, wait," said Dr. Bisbee. "This isn't my decision, it's Mr. Descort's. I'd—I'd better read that part of his letter verbatim. He says here: 'And so I am taking the liberty of sending down a friend of mine, Mr. Mitchell-Hedges McKail, the noted deep sea fisherman who holds the world's record for marlin at this writing, and I am entrusting him with the job—at pay, of course—of procuring the mako. McKail—a professional collector for various ichthyologists and museums—is a young strong fellow whose back is equal to any strain a fish might put upon it.

" 'I know that old Pop Shannon will be hurt by this, so break the news gently; I would not upset him for the world. There is still no finer charter captain in the world, but Pop is getting on, and I like him too much to put him under the strain of landing big game fish. Pop should begin to take things easy now, and by sending McKail down, I hope to make him start easing. I think if you explain to him—' "

"That's enough," Pop Shannon said hollowly. "I've heard enough, Doc."

"I'm terribly sorry," said Dr. Bisbee. "But perhaps Descort is right. You're not getting any younger, Pop, so why take chances? Leave risk and strain to the young bucks. I have myself. Mr. Descort is only thinking—"

"I know," Pop choked. "I heard." He coughed. "Thanks, Doc." He turned and walked out.

When Sherman saw him, Pop's face was gray.

"Pop—what's wrong?"

"Nothing," Pop said bitterly. "I'm gettin' old, that's all. I'm gettin' so old, some folks figure I can't catch a fish anymore!"

Wally Sherman frowned. "I don't get it, Pop."

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"Descort is importin' some professional big fisherman to catch the mako shark. And me? I'm to take care o' my health and live to a ripe old age, throwin' mullet to live porpoises. I'm in what they call a dotage I guess."

"The hell you are," said Sherman.

"The hell I am is right!" Pop Shannon cried savagely. "Wally, how'd you like to go fishin' tomorrow?"

"Sure!" Wally Sherman said. "You mean, we'll go off before this anchor man arrives and we'll have the mako in safe and sound before little Joe can do a thing about it!"

"By glory," Pop said through his teeth, "I'll show him what an old man I am! I'll catch me the biggest damn shark west o' the Gulf Stream. I'll show Mr. Descort I don't have no one foot in a grave!"

THE *Striped Marlin* was berthed at Low Key, east of Laconia, and she was a unique craft. Constructed especially for the Underwater Zoo, she went out to bring the fish home alive and well.

The *Marlin* transom stern was collapsible, and she had two bottoms. When the fish had been brought to what would ordinarily be gaff, a small winch pulled the fish in across the rollers on the collapsed transom, and then into the second bottom, where there was fresh seawater. This second bottom was quite extensive, being some thirty feet long, and with the same beam as the boat itself.

She was seventy feet, and they could not fish from her. She was not maneuverable for the lightning rushes of the big fish. She carried her own sixteen-foot launch, with one fishing chair, and the actual fishing was done from this boat.

The idea was to take the bigger boat far off-shore to the virgin grounds, or to a spot where Pop Shannon, with his fisherman's instinct, knew they could be found. Then the launch was lowered, the fish brought to the big boat, and the catch placed in the tank beneath the floorboards.

They hadn't had the *Striped Marlin* out for over two weeks, and Shannon—who did not trust such things to hired hands—took a run down to Low Key the next day with Wally Sherman. He checked the gear and the engines; everything was in perfect order.

"Well," Pop said, "no reason why we shouldn't go off in the mornin', Wally. Can't just you and me go, not if we're after makos. I'll rustle down by the wharf and pick up Simple Simon and José, and we'll take 'em at day wages."

Pop drove down to the Low Key wharf in his flivver and parked it beyond the sea wall. He strolled down the docks in search of José, the Cuban who owned a small sun-baked dory and caught his fish by himself for a living. Also, Pop was looking for Simon—Simple Simon they called him—the Conch boy with the flaming hair, who had lost his right hand to a shark when he reached into a baited slick.

"José!" Pop Shannon called. "I want a word with you, man!"

"Buenas dias!" José said cheerfully. "Weeth me, old one?"

"Yeah," said Pop. "Is Simon back yet? I want you two lads for a trip tomorrow. I'm taking the big boat off-shore."

José's eyes sparkled. "Feesh for the zoo?"

"Yeah," Pop said. "Don't have to bring anythin' but yourself and your favorite fish-sticker."

"Ah!" said José. "That I weel like! What weel we go after, Pop?"

"Well," said Pop, "we happen to be minus a shark up at the Underwater Zoo; but more than that, the boss thinks I'm getting too old to fish. I've got to show him different. . . .Down off the flats at Correlais, don't you think?"

"Si! Si!" said José. "You smell him, hah? Only thees morning I have been to thee flats of Correlais, and off-shore I saw heem! Ah, the great one! We weel catch heem and bring heem home, hah?"

"Who you talking about?" Pop Shannon grunted. "Who's him? I want to get a mako shark."

"But that ees what I say," José spouted excitedly. "That ees what I mean, old one!

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Weeth my own *ojos,* I have see heem, only thees day! Old Chainmouth heemself! *Si,* Pop, off-shore, off the Correlais flats, he broke the sea in a great splash! Simon, he was close by, he see Old Chainmouth too! Simon, he say damn for he not have harpoon weeth heem. Simon want to catch that feesh. He say that feesh have hees hand in the belly!"

"Old Chainmouth!" Pop Shannon said with a gasp. "Are you sure?"

"*Si,* I am sure! There ees only one Chainmouth. Beeg, like a heepopotamoose; he make such splash, the ocean ees white! T'ousand pounds, *por Dios!* Maybe more, eh? And the rosty chain hanging from hees mouth still!"

Pop grunted. "I don't want Old Chainmouth," he said. "All I want is a good mako. I don't want any record mako. He can't be caught without harpoonin', and we want a live shark, not a dead one."

"It ees more than just harpoon why he can't be caught," said José drily. "Ten twelve years they try to catch that one! But he ees too smart."

THIS was an obvious exaggeration, but Pop realized that he had first heard of Chainmouth at least five years before. Anyhow he wasn't going to argue the point.

"All I want is a good, sound mako shark, three or four hundred pounds. I don't want any monster who'll tow us from here to Europe. Never mind Old Chainmouth, José. Just a shark. Tomorrow morning at six, on the *Marlin,* and you bring Simon along. I want chum, and we'll bait with what we catch."

Si, señor," José said, his eyes shining. "Good chum I get, old stinky mossbunker, eh?"

Pop swallowed hard, nodded, and then drove back to Laconia and the Underwater Zoo. Wally Sherman was anxious to know whom he had found for crew.

"José and Simon. They're good boys. José was sayin' that he seen Old Chainmouth off the Correlais." Pop shook his head. "Don't reckon we could fit him in if'n we did ever land him."

"Who is Old Chainmouth?" Sherman asked. "I never heard of him."

Pop stared at Sherman incredulously. "You never heard . . . but that's right. Reckon a man that don't like fishin' wouldn't have heard o' him. Well, youngster Old Chainmouth is the biggest shark ever seen around the Florida peninsula. Nobody knows how long he's been hangin' around, but he comes and goes, from Correlais Flats, where he was born maybe, over to Bimini, as far north as Hatteras, and then back again. He never goes really north—at least he ain't been sighted farther than Hatteras."

Sherman's eyes were shining. "Where does he get that fancy name?"

"He's got a six-foot hunk o' chain hangin' from the side of his mouth," said Pop Shannon. "It's rusty now, but it still holds together. The story is that a man named John Valkon hooked him in Thirty-five, usin' a big twisted shark hook with this chain attached. Valkon had the hook linked to the chain which went to a rope and then a small empty barrel. He was gonna let Old Chainmouth swim around until he tired himself out, trying to get rid o' the barrel.

"But it was nothing doing. Valkon seen his barrel go to pieces when Chainmouth clipped it, and the next thing, Valkon was in the drink himself when the shark took off the stern of his dory in one nice bite. Valkon was saved by the skin o' his teeth, and he never hunted Chainmouth again. But you can see the chain still hangin' there, even though the rope's rotted off with the years."

Sherman said suddenly: "Pop, you aren't thinking—"

Pop grunted. "We don't want Chainmouth, Wally. All we want is a nice young mako shark, that's all, and tomorrow we'll get him."

AT DAWN the next morning it was quiet aboard the *Striped Marlin,* with only the faint and pleasant swish of the sea at her bow. Her engines made only the slightest sound and vibration, and Pop Shannon,

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in the deckhouse below the bridge, was scarcely aware of them.

He had cooked up some coffee and he and Sherman drank it. José was at the helm, above them, fondling the chromium controls with delight. He was a paid hand, of course, but to handle such a fine boat he would have come along as a volunteer.

In the cockpit astern, Simple Simon was rigging the chum board and the meat grinder. Pop watched him, marveling at the dexterity of Simon who did it all with one hand. The barrels of old mossbunker were also in the stern, and they smelled high. Simon didn't seem to mind. Matter of fact, Pop didn't either, but young Sherman looked a trifle glassy, and finally went to the windward side of the boat.

About an hour later Pop called up to José, "Swing her out half a mile, by the Willownut Channel and anchor just off it. I want the slick to follow the channel out with the tide."

They cast anchor. There was a slight swell, but it was a perfect day with white clouds and a sun that promised to be hot and bright. It was the sort of day on which sharks surfaced, their dorsal fins lifting like sable sails above the sea, as they basked in the sun's warmth.

Pop said, ".'Course, we shoulda come out at night if we was in a hurry, Wally. Sharks feed at night mostly. But there wasn't a shark born could help eating a bait if he smelt it. All right, Simon, start the slick. José, you and Wally swing out the launch so's she's ready to go, and I'll rig the rod."

Simon started feeding mossbunker to the grinding machine and he hurled the residue overboard where it created an oily slick upon the sea surface. Pop Shannon rigged the fifty-ounce bamboo rod with a sixteen-zero reel and seventy-two-thread line. That was heavy tackle, but he didn't want to fool around.

Simon kept chumming, and he began to sing a song of the flats. The boat rolled lazily. Presently, José came down and relieved Simon. They had been there forty minutes when a fish struck the bait.

Pop Shannon grabbed the rod, which he had had in a butt rest, and he set the drag and struck hard. Instantly, the line began to go out in strong surges, and the reel began to sing. Pop put lots of pressure on the star drag, as much as he dared, and then let the fish run.

"Dang!" he said evenly. "Dang the luck."

"What is it?" Sherman said excitedly. "A mako?"

José was holding the launch's painter, figuring Pop would step into the little boat with the rod in his hands.

"Never mind that," Pop grunted. "We've got a tuna on here! A tuna big enough to wear me out. Dang him. There he's stopped his run. Heave ho."

He bent his weight to the rod and lifted it back in short, mildly sharp strokes, and he gained some line. "Get me the harness," he said. "This boy's got weight."

With the harness on, he worked, sweating for twenty minutes, and the fish suddenly showed, twenty feet off the stern, looking green gold beneath the water.

"Try and gaff him, José," Pop grunted. "He'll make another run if'n you don't and I ain't fooling around with no tunas today. *Hey!*"

THE reel whirred and began to smoke. Simon threw sea water on it to cool it. The tuna disappeared like lightning. Out beyond the boat, there was a terrific disturbance in the sea, and the surface went mad with whorls.

Suddenly Pop fell back, as if the weight had been lifted. "Name o' God," he said, "somethin's bit the tuna in half at least!"

He hauled hurriedly on the line and it came very easily, for the tuna could no longer use his tail and body. Pop worked the reel frantically, but he didn't bring the hook back.

Before he could, a grayish monster took it and started for the open sea. They all saw him, long and thick and ghastly, like a young whale. Pop gasped, his eyes popping. In all his years of fishing, he had never been hooked to anything that big.

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"Orca?" Sherman cried. "Blackfish? Better cut him loose!"

Hell broke loose across that placid stretch of sea. Out of the depths the huge fish rose, majestic as a mountain peak, rearing into the sky on its great tail, its body bent like a broaching marlin's, its cavernous and horrifying jaws snapping. A length of rust chain mingled with the chain of Pop's leader, and there was metallic music over the waters. Then the monster fell into the water again with a tremendous splash, and the reel began to burn.

"Old Chainmouth!" José screamed, waving at the sea, "It ees Old Chainmouth! You are hooked, old one!"

"Cut him loose!" Sherman roared, grabbing his motion-picture camera and waiting for the fish to stand on his tail again. "Cut him loose, Pop!"

"Can't cut him loose," Pop Shannon sighed. He stepped from the big boat into the small launch. José laughing excitedly, jumped in after him. "Let's go, José. No sense playing him yet; let him run away. I'll set the drag, and he can tow us for a while. Wally, you keep an eye on us and follow if he takes us out to sea. Keep near us with the big boat and get a rifle out in case we need it. There's no telling with a fish like this!"

José started the engine, and the launch pulled away from the *Striped Marlin*. Pop set the drag, leaving just enough give in the reel to ease a sudden strain. He braced his feet against the launch's stern, and settled himself.

"Idle her," he told José. José did, but the launch began to move nevertheless, toward the sea. And Old Chainmouth did not show himself again.

FIFTEEN hours in one seat aboard a small launch is eternity. Pop Shannon felt like broken glass. His whole body ached, his arms were leaden, his head drooped.

Out there, in the darkness of that day, Old Chainmouth was cavorting playfully. They could hear the thunder of his body upon the invisible surface of the sea.

"Madre de Dios!" José whispered. "This one, he cannot be caught, Pop. He ees too beeg. It cannot be done, no! Weeth a harpoon maybe, but weeth hook and line and stick, no! Cut heem loose, Pop. You are seek."

"I ain't sick," Pop grunted, furious. "And I never cut a fish loose in my life!"

"Fifteen hour, Pop!" José pleaded. "You keel yourself! Meestuh Sherman, he say he have coffee, food. You stop, we go eat, heh? The other boat, she over there in the dark. See her lights, eh?"

Pop Shannon knew he was licked. But that didn't solve the problem. He was licked, but he was still tied into his fish. He would have given almost anything to be gone from the fishing chair, to be aboard the *Striped Marlin* resting below in a comfortable berth, with Sherman feeding him good food.

There had not been much he could do all day, except check the rushes of Old

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Chainmouth with a tightening of the drag. The great shark had towed them all over the ocean, and Pop had absolutely lost himself. He didn't know but what they might be off Key West or Fort Lauderdale.

As he held on grimly, Pop secretly prayed for the line to part. He had screwed the drag up dangerously tight. Dangerously, because the lack of give might yank him overboard. The reel was clipped to the leather harness, which was strapped around him. If Old Chainmouth rushed off too fast, if the line did not snap, and the drag did not release the line fast enough—he would go overboard like a flash.

But Pop was playing it close to his chest regardless. He kept his fingers on the drag all the time, ready to release it if necessary, and hoping it would not freeze. José was aware of the situation, and stood by with a sticker, all ready to cut the line if things looked bad.

"Listen, José," Pop said finally, "this bird has been pullin' us long enough. He feels a little tired. Maybe he don't know it, but we ain't movin' as fast as we were."

"*Si,*" said José drily. He was tired himself. "But you are not as strong as you were, eh? Maybe you are both losing, hah!"

"I'm going to give it to him," Pop said. "I'm going to see if he feels this hook. If he don't feel it, I'll—I'll cut the line. But if'n he feels it, I'll stick."

"All right," said José. "Geeve eet to heem."

"Put the boat in gear and move away from him," said Pop. "If he balks, idle."

"*Si,* Pop *si.*"

The launch moved forward slowly, and the rod bent down. Pop released the drag a little, and the line payed out as the mako balked. Then Pop heaved back sharply on the rod—once, twice, three times. Off in the dark, there was sudden thunder, a terrific splash, and the line almost went slack. Pop reeled madly, finally gained some fifty feet of line as the shark thrashed the ocean. Then he balked again.

Pop looked at José. "He felt that, boy. He felt that."

"*Si,*" said José excitedly. "He skitter! He feel eet!"

"Well," said Pop, "I ain't comfortable no matter how you look at it. I might as well make it a little worse. You keep moving slowly. I'm gonna put a drag on his jaw all night long. Maybe he'll get tired that way. He's gotta get tired like me." Pop paused for breath. "He's hooked in the jaw. Too bad he didn't swallow it. We'd have had him in by now. Ain't sportsmanlike, but I'm not sporting. I want to go home."

They began to keep the watch again, Pop gaining a little line now and then when he worked the rod. It was killing work.

"Maybe in three hours," Pop kept thinking. "Maybe in two hours."

WHEN the sun came over the rim of the eastern sea, Sherman got worried. He had Simon bring the *Striped Marlin* within hailing distance of the launch, and he called over through a megaphone; "Pop! Why don't you cut him loose! Twenty-two hours! You'll kill yourself!"

Pop looked wearily at José and said, "Ask him where we are and what the weather is."

"We're seventy-two miles southeast of Low Key," Sherman replied. "Halfway between Laconia and Cuba! If you don't cut that fish off, we're liable to wind up in the Leeward Islands!"

"Ask him about—the weather."

José asked, and Sherman said reluctantly, "It's good. Barometer is steady above thirty."

"Tell him," Pop said, "that we're stickin'. José, this dang shark is gettin' tired. He's losin' his strength against the drag and I'm gettin' in more line."

"How ees your strength?" José asked. "Pop, you look lak one beeg ghost, no keeding."

"I'll land this barrel-bellied man-eater if it's the last thing I do!"

. . . Around four that afternoon, Pop seemed to get a second wind, and he sensed that the end was coming. Old Chainmouth began to get erratic. He broached twice,

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for no reason at all, and then began to swim madly in circles. He came closer to the launch, and finally he left the water so close to them that they could have hit him with a stone.

Pop set to, lifting the rod and reeling in the line to take up the slack. It was hard, tough work, but the mako came slowly.

Old Chainmouth did not surrender in a moment. He made a further rush away from the pressure of the hook. But it was a slow, dogged rush, with none of the fire and strength of those early runs.

Every muscle in Pop's body was passed aching, and he felt encompassed by a weariness that had become almost pleasant. Once, in a lull, he actually had dozed for a moment, awakening to the rude shock of the rod jerking in his hands. José himself looked haggard.

Pop began to pump the rod in earnest, feeling Old Chainmouth giving in.

Suddenly the line went slack. Pop gasped and began to reel madly. "I'm losing him! I'm losing him!" he yelled. As fast as he reeled, the line went slack and he could not seem to make up the difference. Down there in the green sea, the hook would be hanging limply from the shark's jaw.

"Pop!" José screamed.

OLD CHAINMOUTH left the sea. His last instinct—to shake that prickling hook from his jaws—drove him up from the depths, into the air. Twenty feet of him, full grown, a huge length of solid muscle, on his tail. His body twisted, and his head swung back savagely, to and fro, his jaws snapping.

He was no more than thirty feet from the stern of the launch.

He fell into the sea amidst a geyser of white water. José was pale as death.

Pop shouted, "Start the engine, José; pull to the big boat! He's trying to rush us!"

The engine caught, and the launch moved forward quickly. Pop jumped erect, still holding his rod. The ominous gray shadow, bigger, it seemed, under the surface, flashed at the boat. They felt a bump; Pop was flung against a chair, which alone prevented him from diving overboard, rod and all. Frantically he released the pressure of the drag. The launch heeled in the air on its starboard beam as Old Chainmouth tried to rise beneath it. The pressure was too much, he quickly sank, and the boat righted, crazily rocking.

Aboard the *Striped Marlin,* young Sherman saw what was happening and ran for a rifle. Simple Simon, ahead of Sherman, was bringing the big boat over to the launch, for the time had come to change craft.

José yelled shrilly and pointed astern. The huge mako began to come out of the sea in a gentle arc upward. In an instant, the dorsal fin showed, then the gray sandpapery back, then the head, and finally the gaping jaws, with the twin sets of triangular teeth.

Pop was transfixed. He looked into the jaws which would have accommodated three of himself with no trouble at all. José, acting in blind panic, grabbed Pop by the leather harness, jerked him back from the stern, across the engine hatch, and into the bow of the boat.

The jaws closed on the stern. It disappeared in a racking crunch of broken wood. Then with a slap of his tail which sent the spray forty feet in the air, Old Chainmouth sounded, taking line out again. Sherman was so stunned he had not even taken a shot.

In a moment, as the launch quickly filled, Simon brought the big boat alongside. José sprang into the *Marlin,* still holding Pop's harness. Sherman lent a hand, and they lifted Pop bodily into the cockpit of the big boat.

With a few gurgles and bubbles, the launch flooded from stem to stern and went down, on its starboard beam.

It occurred to Pop that he still held the rod and that Old Chainmouth was still hooked. Pop sank into one of the fishing chairs on the stern, and set the rod in a socket.

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"Wally," he rasped, "hypodermic needle with stuff. You know all about that, get one ready!"

Sherman said, "You mean hypo this monster to sleep? I'd have to give him two shots of morphine—"

"Then give him two shots!"

"But how—"

"I'm going to bring him to gaff!" Pop grunted. "It's been a long time and I'll never be the same man, but we're goin' to take this fish home with us alive, for the tank! I've got him comin' now, that flurry was his last bid—*uh!*"

He heaved as he spoke, and it was plain to see that he was regaining line fast. The rod held its head up with no jerk or strain on it.

"José," Pop said. "The shillelagh! Right on the nose hard. You couldn't kill him if you tried. But wait till the leader comes in. I got a record here."

BEHIND the *Marlin*, the bulk showed. Old Chainmouth looked a little sick. He was rolling lazily, struggling now and then, finally giving in. Simon took Sherman's rifle and prepared to shoot any cannibals who showed up to make a meal of the big mako.

There was a clink on the stern, and Pop tensed with excitement. His arms ached, but the chain was coming over the transom, and it was music to his ears. He reeled up tight until the chain was close to the rod tip, and then he stopped and waited.

José leaned over the stern, where Old Chainmouth lolled. José had the hickory billy in his hand and he walloped the shark twice on the tip of his pointed nose, the only spot where he could really feel anything. Chainmouth lashed the sea with his tail, but on the third knock he just rolled, like a round-hulled boat. Sherman came out of the cabin, leaned over and jammed a needle into Chainmouth and emptied the contents. He slipped a new cartridge into the hypodermic and emptied this.

Simon, meanwhile, had started the roping. He looped a rope over the head and gingerly eased it behind the fins. Then he tightened it. "Better put a gaff in his jaw," he said. "Flying gaff in case he tries to go."

"No," Pop said. "Gaff might hurt him, might make him run. Let him alone for a few minutes and stand by to keep off other sharks with a harpoon and the gun. He ain't bleedin' and we may not have other sharks. Wally, let the transom down and open the double bottom. We'll ease him on the boat in a few minutes."

Within twenty minutes, Old Chainmouth lay in the tank beneath the hatches. He was drugged. Simon went down and took out the hook and slapped the shark's back once. "Where's my hand?" he said. "You still got my hand in your belly, big one?" José laughed at that. Everybody felt pretty good.

Except Pop.

Homeward bound, the *Striped Marlin* bit in, a bone in her teeth, for José had stepped up the engines to 2400 revs per minute. The boat went along across the glass sea with a gentle motion.

Pop went below and stretched out in a berth. Wally Sherman came down with him. "Pop," he said. "You've caught the biggest fish ever landed on rod and reel by man."

"No," Pop said. "He won't go over thousand pounds. Zane Grey done better'n that. But it's a new record for Chainmouth's tribe."

"I tell you," said Sherman, "he's three quarters of a ton."

"Half ton," Pop gasped. "Ain't . . . in the . . . mood t'argue—" and he collapsed instantly. He slept down there in the forward cabin for seventeen hours, long after the boat made Low Key in the dark. He slept through the night while the Conches came to gaze in silent stupefaction upon the beast he had landed. He slept, Sherman guarding him—the warrior resting from his battle.

IN THE morning, when he awoke, Pop was a sick man, and Sherman sent for a doctor. The doctor worked on him and

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said he would be all right, but that didn't make Pop feel any better. After a while, Wally Sherman got word from the Underwater Zoo that Mitchell-Hedges McKail, the game fisherman, had arrived in Laconia from New York.

Sherman told Pop. "I'm going to drive up to the Zoo and give him his walking papers," Wally said. "Too bad you can't see his face, Pop, when I tell him about this catch."

"We didn't get a mako," Pop said. "Chainmouth is a great white. We still need a mako."

"I know, I know," said young Sherman. "But you can catch a mako soon enough. We can send this golden boy back home. Mr. Descort wouldn't have it any different after he hears the news!"

"No," Pop said. "Let McKail get the mako."

"What did you say?"

"I said, let McKail get the mako," Pop said quietly, sighing. "Let him have it."

"Pop!"

"You heard me," Pop said slowly. "Descorts was right. I aint gettin' any younger. I've caught my last big one, son. From now on I'm gonna stick t' feedin' mullet to Tildy; I caught my share of fish; let the young bucks take it over now. You tell Doc Bisbee I said that, will you?"

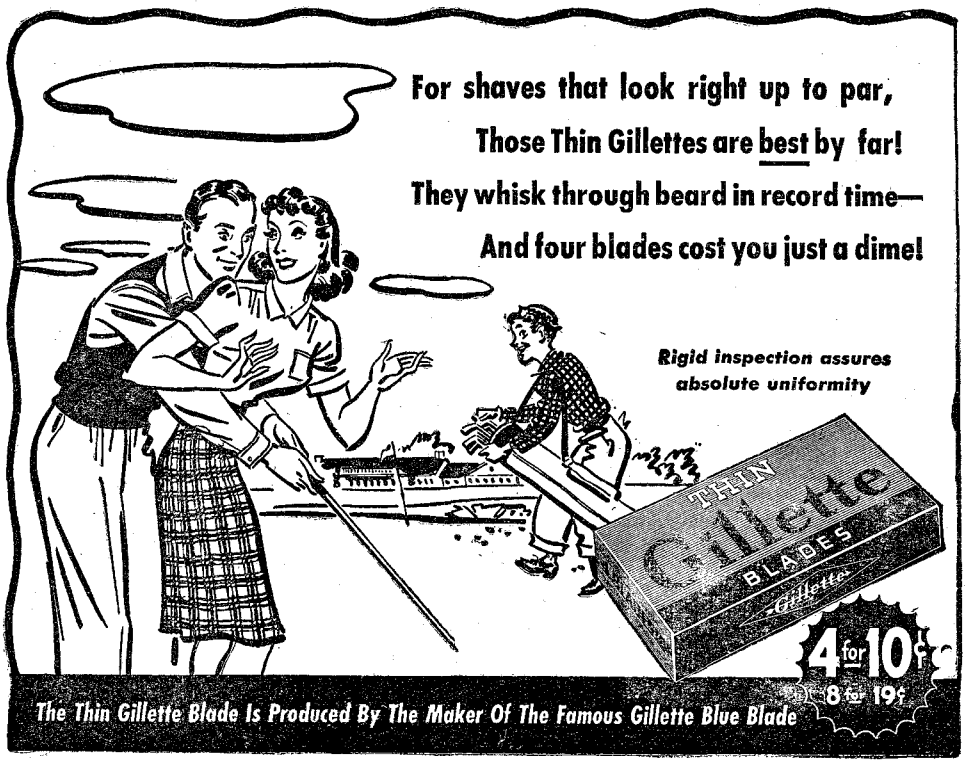
Sherman looked dismayed, but he murmured, "All right, Pop. If you say so."

"Tell Doc Bisbee I caught my last big fish," Pop whispered.

"All right," Sherman said.

"But in th' name o' glory," Pop exclaimed with sudden fire, "don't make it sound like I was on my death bed or somethin'. You dang right tell him my last one was a dandy, Wally, and that I'll be a dried-out corpse before any o' them young bucks ever get one the like o' it!"

"Sure!" Sherman said with enthusiasm. "I'll tell them, Pop. Just leave it to me!"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Guns on Fire

By JACK BYRNE

Author of "$1,000 Every Thursday," etc.

With a sidearm that never had time to cool, Vern Colton came up out of Texas for a job of work. Twenty dollars a day, and bullets to eat between meals; every man and woman in town as an enemy. And for what? . . . . Not to take sides in a finish fight

CHAPTER I

FIVE ACES

THEY rode into the single dusty street from opposite ends of the town. The fat man on the steeldust gray, with weary packhorse trailing, came from the malpais country north. Vern Colton traveled with the long trail from the Panhandle behind him.

They met at the hitch-rack that fronted the one large building of the town. A sun-faded sign proclaimed that this was the Stockmen's Rest—Carson and Murray, Props.

Vern Colton eased down from the kak—a lean, dark man of middle height—and flexed his body to ease the saddle-kinks. His fingers moved quickly at the cinch of his centerfire rig, and his sorrel twisted a long, intelligent head to nuzzle his shoulder.

"There a feed barn hereabouts?" the fat man asked. His voice was deep, trail-husky.

Vern shrugged. "I'm a pilgrim myself," he said. "Reckon they'll know inside there."

The Stockmen's Rest was dark and pleasantly cool. At a table beyond the bar four men played listless blackjack. The barkeep leaned a sad face on one clenched hand and stared at them.

"Well, what the hell!" the fat man rumbled. "You serve drinks here or is it the ladies' sewin' circle?"

The barkeep started, jerked upright. The men at the card table chuckled. "Asleep on his feet ag'in," one of them said.

Vern Colton spun a silver dollar on the bar, drank twice and listened. The fat man kept rattling out questions, and Vern gathered that this was the town of Hathaways, that the barkeep didn't admire this dry spell neither, and that there was a livery over yonder.

The barkeep called a name and a half-grown boy popped up from the rear of the place. The fat man flipped a coin.

"Want yours stabled?" the boy asked Vern.

Colton shook his head. "I'll dangle along," he said. The fat man's voice kept booming but Colton knew the man was watching him as he left. At the swing doors he turned, saw the four at the card table staring after him.

HE WAS brushing cracker crumbs from his shirt when he re-entered the place a little later. The fat man was still at the bar. The bottle at his elbow was appreciably lowered but he showed no outward effects of his drinking. His smile was as friendly, his voice as jovial as ever:

"You a poker player, mister?"

"I given it a flutter or two in my time," Vern said. He glanced toward the four at the table. "I aim to travel out from here, come sundown, but I'd look at a few hole-cards mebbe, in the meantime."

The fat man ordered drinks around, to get acquainted. One of the players at the table stood up. He was a gaunt and pallid man with intense blue eyes, and he carried

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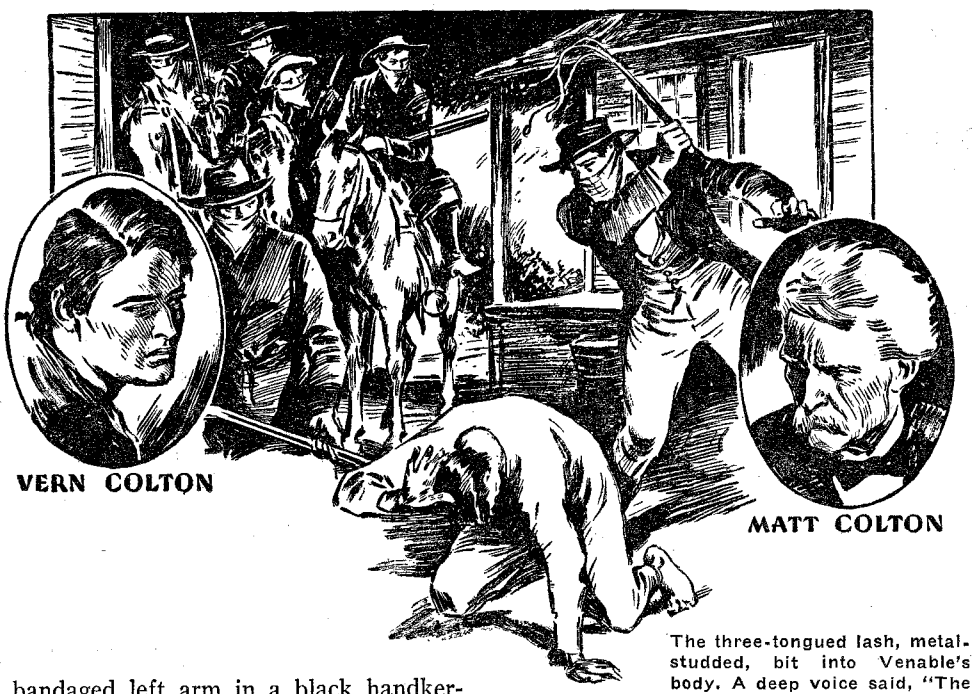

The three-tongued lash, metal-studded, bit into Venable's body. A deep voice said, "The cowmen don't want your kind here"

a bandaged left arm in a black handkerchief sling. He introduced himself as John Murray, mumbled some names for the others.

"Name's Jarnell," the fat man said. He looked at Colton, waited.

Vern lifted three gold coins from his shirt pocket and placed them on the table. He hooked a chair with spurred heel, sat down.

"Call me Tex," he told them. "I'm fresh from there." His eyes lifted to the shiny eyes of the fat man.

"That's a real nice animal you ride," said Jarnell. "Texas hoss?"

"The stock come out of New Mexico, I understand."

"You handle him mighty particular too, I notice."

"Him and me got a deal," Vern said. "He gets us places where the business is and I handle the business."

The fat man grinned in face of the veiled rebuke. "Well, deal 'em up, Mr. Tex. Let's see how you ride when the stud hoss starts buckin'."

Blue pasteboards slapped the table top and chips rattled. The game began slowly, each man testing the other's play. The fat Jarnell won the opening pot with a pair of nines, and on the fifth deal bluffed them out of a jackpot with an ace-king showing.

He chuckled and his dark eyes gleamed. He signaled the barkeep.

"Bet 'em up, boys!" he boomed. "Can't beat 'em if you don't see 'em."

Gaunt John Murray grinned crookedly and riffled the cards. The game went on. And as the afternoon shadows lengthened in the Stockmen's Rest, luck continued to ride with the jovial Jarnell.

The stocky, towheaded man who spoke of his horse ranch on Apache Flats, ripped up the high flush that lost to Jarnell's full house and quit the game, cursing. John Murray's blue eyes grew more intense in his pale face. And Vern Colton, for the fourth time, spilled more gold coins on the table.

Jarnell grinned and waved a stubby arm. "Barkeep!"

Vern Colton did not drink again. He

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leaned back, pretending to study his hole card, but his perception was for the others around the table.

He glimpsed the almost imperceptible signal that passed from Murray to the other two in the game. He saw the so-called stockman from Apache Flats slide down the bar and let his hand dangle carelessly close to his holstered gun. He noted the sly move of the sleepy barman, and his fingers tensed, clenched.

Jarnell was dealing. Murray was high with a black ace and bet it big.

The fat man chuckled, "That's poker!" and raised the pot four red chips. The others called; but Vern Colton, with a seven up and a deuce down, shook his head slowly.

"Too mucho dinero," he drawled. He folded his cards and slid his chair back a trifle.

In just about three minutes . . .

IT HAPPENED quicker than that. The others dropped out with the fall of the second card, and Jarnell and Murray fought it out head and head. Back and across the table the raises ran, and chips and gold and currency sweetened the pot.

John Murray, his face harshly drawn, stared down at the two kings and the black ace and the seven that made up his hand. The fat man smiled at a pair of aces and two smaller cards arrayed before him.

"Your bet," he reminded.

Murray lifted the edge of his hole card. He shifted in his chair and his bandaged arm jutted queerly. His fingers clicked chip against chip.

"This time, mister," he said, "I got you where the hair is short. If we wasn't playin' table stakes—"

He shrugged, pushed the chips forward. "I call the bluff," he said.

Jarnell's jowels creased in a wide smile. "Bluff"—he chuckled, and he flipped his hole card. "I was the one with the lock on Cripple Creek! Read 'em, brother—three big aces—"

His voice faded abruptly. He stared across at Murray and the joviality was squeezed out of him. "Well, what's wrong? What in hell you lookin' at?"

"At you," said Murray. "The only thing wrong is a little matter of detail. You dealt the cards, so suppose you explain how *this* happened."

He faced his hidden card. "How come, mister, we both had the same red ace in the hole? When did they start makin' decks with *five* aces?"

His voice was harsh in the sudden hush that gripped the place. The fat man's jaw sagged. And Vern Colton saw Murray's arm in its handkerchief sling begin to move slowly.

Vern went into action.

His .38 snaked out of his holster in a move of effortless speed. His snap-shot struck Murray in the upper body, turning him with its force of impact.

Long splinters jabbed up in the table top as Vern lunged sidewise; but he was already lifting, toppling the table back. He twisted and fired again as he huddled close to the floor, and his voice shouted command:

"The barkeep, Jarnell—get him, man!"

It needed chill-steel nerves to time the play as he had, to choose the instant of intervention when all attention was centered on Jarnell.

And it required split-second planning to list the dangers in order of importance—Murray with his hideout gun, the so-called stockman at the bar, the barkeep fumbling beneath his counter—and to plot the battle scheme of two against five.

An expert's ease had flicked his .38 from holster. It seemed the butt sprang into his hand, conjured there.

In the same heartbeat's space that his bullet was staggering John Murray back, he had jerked the table into the laps of Murray's seated companions, sprawling them down in a tangle of chairs and bodies, blocking them out of the action.

It was calculation trained to instinct, that lurched him sidewise and crouched him on one knee.

In that single move he shifted the primary line of fire, he shrank himself to

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the smallest possible target, he steadied his aim for the shot that eliminated the second danger, the horse rancher from Apache Flats whose opening bullet had splintered the table.

The gun dropped from this towhead's hand as Vern's slug bit into him. He was a man struck by an invisible fist, his mouth sagging open as he jolted against the bar.

The muzzle of Vern's revolver switched quickly, but there was no need now to shoot again.

EVEN in the blur of hair-trigger events, a remote part of his consciousness had noted the swift precision of his chance-chosen partner, Jarnell.

Beset by surprise, unprepared for the abrupt transition from stud to sixguns, unable to see how the jaws of the trap were closing, the fat man had faced perhaps the sterner task.

Instinct must have pointed John Murray as his target, but there was no hesitation in his swirling pivot that obeyed Vern's shouted command. He swiveled and fired in the same crouching blurt of movement, and the barkeep and his riot-gun sagged down behind the bar together.

He was backed against the bar now, half squatting, and his steady gun covered the two who had been tenpinned down with the table's overthrow. His ruddy face glistened with a pour of nervous sweat, but his voice was softly controlled.

"Up!" he ordered. "Stand up and get 'em up! And you, proprietor, if you want a bullet just wink your eye!"

"Stand out!" Vern said to the towheaded man. "Line up with your compadres there." He hiked himself upon the pine counter to peer behind the bar. "Buzzard meat," he said. "Square through the head."

"I didn't aim to miss," said the fat man.

The tableau held in silence while slow seconds ticked. Beyond the spill of chairs and the toppled table four would-be killers stood in a row.

Two of them posed with nervous hands upstretched. The towheaded man gripped his right arm hard, blood staining his fingers. Murray pressed both palms against his upper chest.

"You had no call," he said, his pale eyes bright with pain. "It wasn't your fight, Texan."

Vern Colton said, "Five against one and a deadfall deal ain't my idea of a fight."

He sidled forward to the swing doors, scanned the street up and down. A scattering few were halted along the roadway, and a knot of three or four were craning necks from a porch below. But no one came to investigate the gun-sounds from the Stockmen's Rest.

"Maybe this is a regular thing," Vern Colton said, turning. "I reckon I can hold 'em, Jarnell, while you bring the horses around. It's straight out back there, turn left."

Jarnell nodded. He went out the rear door, without question.

Vern watched the faces of the four. The barrel of his gun swayed slowly, moving from man to man. "You, there, you with the squint eye," he commanded—"pick up those cutters and drop 'em in your hat. Collect that money off the floor."

"I'll remember your face, Texas," Murray spoke behind clenched teeth. "I'll recall that crooked nose when I cut your sign again."

"You talk mighty big," Vern said, "for somebody who needed four to help him, plus a stingy gun in a decoy sling, to down one lone man. I heard they raised them tougher than that in this Blue Hills country."

The towhead moaned. "For Heaven's sake git me a bandage here. You want to bleed a man to death?"

"Sit in that chair over yonder," Vern told him. "Now you'll know how a bullet feels, next time you line your sights between a man's shoulders."

When Jarnell hailed from outside he backed slowly toward the rear doorway. He carried Squint Eye's laden hat in the crook of his arm. "I'll drop these hoglegs at the edge of town," he said.

He nodded at the gaunt man, Murray.

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"You keep in mind, mister," he said, "I could just as easy have pulled that bullet three inches down as put it in your shoulder."

CHAPTER II

SHY TOUGH FROM TEXAS

THEY rode from Hathaways without disturbance, and the back track showed no sign of pursuit. For half an hour they pushed at a steady pace towards the lowering sun, following a traveled road, with only brief remarks exchanged between them.

At the crest of a long slope they paused to breathe their mounts.

The fat man thrust out his hand abruptly. "I was a gone goose back there," he said, "if it wasn't for you."

Vern Colton had expected flabbiness in the hand. Instead his grip encountered calloused flesh and the pressure of tremendous strength.

Jarnell was in his early forties, he judged, and his paunched two hundred and fifty-odd pounds had a grizzly's deceptiveness: his seeming fat was a big-boned frame layered in solid flesh and heavy sinew.

"It was self-protection partly," Vern said. "You'd hardly murder a man and leave an eye-witness runnin' loose, was how I figured."

"Ummmmm." Jarnell nodded. "They switched decks on me somehow, and I—" His heavy shoulders slumped. "I wasn't lookin' for trouble so quick, that's a fact. If I had my eye peeled at all—shucks, I was watchin' *you*."

"So I noticed," said Vern. He produced Squint Eye's black hat and a quart bottle. "I happened to find this on the bar. Help yourself."

"How!" said Jarnell. He drank sparingly. Vern Colton squinted at the bottle, measured with his thumb, and let the tawny liquor gurgle. He inhaled deeply, wiping a wry mouth with his sleeve. He had downed more than half a pint in that single tilting.

"Two hundred of this money here is what I dropped in the game," he said. "The rest is yours, Jarnell." He grinned. "I didn't wait to have the chips cashed."

Jarnell studied him oddly. When Vern had selected gold coins and bills from the hat and passed it across, the fat man looked down at the remainder. He lifted bank notes, dropped them idly.

"Around six hundred there, I'd say," Vern said.

Jarnell nodded. "And what good would it have been to me if things had worked out different back yonder?" He let his dark glance roam the horizon, and as he faced west a deep frown puckered his eyes.

"If I wasn't a damn fool," he said softly, "I'd turn tail for Kansas."

Vern Colton rolled and lit a cigarette. The whisky was a warm exaltation inside him, and pretty soon he'd feel all right.

The sun was painting the far sky in crimson and purple and gold, and the cloud wrack that topped the distant loom of mountains was brilliantly afire. The shadows of an ebbing spring day draped a gloom upon the rugged terrain they saw. Beyond the gully-gutted grassland's sweep the timbered hills seemed to march to infinity. It was a wild, harsh country.

"Which way you ridin'?" Jarnell asked.

"Me? Oh, I'm headin' on a ways."

"I'm bound for Rapid City," the fat man said. "It lies just west of here." He eyed Vern steadily. "I could use a good man in my business. He could earn himself real good pay."

"I already got a deal on," Vern said. "Leastwise, I got to see a man. But thanks just the same. I hear there's big doin's in Rapid City."

"Too big," said Jarnell. "When a town grows too fast, when men make money too quick—" He shrugged. "Skyrockets show a pretty tail but they die off mighty sudden."

They continued to talk casually as they descended the slope. A quarter-mile beyond, at a fork in the roads, they exchanged brief farewells. Vern Colton pushed along the east branch for perhaps

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twenty minutes, then pulled the sorrel up. He drank from the bottle, a long, deep pull.

He pressed against his eyes with the heels of his hands, shaking his head. They had caught him bad today. For a while back there it had required every ounce of his will power to conceal his state from the fat man.

Nerves, the shakes, the jumps. Whisky was the one sure cure for them.

IT WAS about a year now since they first came on. The first time he really noticed was that night in El Paso he downed Peck Savine. It was in one of the River Street dives, and he'd given Peck a fair chance to surrender.

Mail robbery was the charge, and the price on Peck's scalp was a thousand dollars.

Vern Colton had walked into a trap that night. Two friends of Peck Savine had been trailing the trailer, and one of them shot Vern's hat off as Savine meekly lifted his hands.

It was three to one, and hell to pay, for a few red minutes. When the smoke lifted there was a dead man on the floor, and a second man who hadn't long to live.

Vern Colton had a broken nose and a bullet crease along his scalp, but men still spoke of his cool-as-a-cucumber poise as he gun-prodded Peck Savine along the street toward the jail house.

So men thought of him: steel-nerved, ice-blooded, a machine. And it was important that men continue to think of him as such. A gunner's chief stock in trade is the fear his reputation breeds.

Nobody saw what happened to Vern Colton a half hour after Peck Savine had been slapped into a cell. The reaction hit him then, and he staggered down an alley like a man blind drunk. His stomach turned flipflops and every nerve in his body was jangling.

He was violently sick, and for a while he sat with his head on his knees, weak as a cat. He had needed the shock of whisky in heavy doses to pull him out.

That was the first time but not the last. There'd been other such conniptions to follow, just like this one today.

It was buck-fever in reverse, the way Vern figured it. He could walk right in on any mixup and never turn a hair. When the time for action came he could meet the situation with cold, hard logic, with automatic skill. As long as the excitement lasted he could play the role of hard-case.

But when the ball was over, the ugly letdown came. Overkeyed nerves took their toll and hard-held muscles rebelled. Six-eight times now this had happened, and memory of them was a sour poison inside. Was there a yellow streak deep in him, he wondered, and this its way of showing through?

He didn't know, didn't know. He drank his whisky and tried to forget—until the next time.

. . . The raw spirits were working now. The redeye had a soothing easement which filled the emptiness in the pit of his stomach. John Barleycorn, the brave-maker. In a little while he'd be all right. He'd be feeling fine.

He pressed knee to the sorrel, turned the horse back to the fork in the road where he had quitted Jarnell. He shrugged as he rode along in the direction of Rapid City.

That was the way things were in Vern Colton's line of work. You kept your lip buttoned and your business to yourself. It never paid to be friendly with any man.

A few years back Vern Colton would have gone on to town with the fat Jarnell. By now they'd be first-naming each other, checking up on mutual friends and swapping pedigrees. Come evening they'd celebrate, most likely, with a little soirée.

Instead Vern had withheld even his identity, had lied about his destination. His restraint had erected a barrier to the fat man's gratitude, had parted them awkwardly.

But that was part of the system that earned a gun-hand's pay.

It was full dark when Vern hit the cutoff that led to the headquarters of the

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Triangle-C. He had been a kid last time he headed up this trail, he thought—a freckle-faced button with his saddle cinched on a high-stepping cavvy of dreams.

Tonight he was a man with a rope tied fast to man's realities.

He tilted the bottle, finished it, hurled it away. The whisky buzzed beneath his belt and oiled his brain. His thoughts were light and quick and his muscles had a giant's coiled strength.

He hummed a tune as he rode along.

He lifted his voice and sang.

SOME time before midnight a hulking shadow hesitated before Matthew Colton's bedroom door. Knuckles tapped.

"Damn you, Oscar, I'm readin'!" the old man called. "What's all the hellfire rumpus goin' on?"

The man who entered the room was enormous. He topped six feet by many inches, and gorilla arms dangled from a neanderthal spread of shoulders.

"Faller down dere," he said, "he don' care whatever time it is. He says you put on some horns an' hoofs, Mr. Matt, an' come down."

"He does, huh? What else, Oscar?"

"He says he wrap me around my ears if I don't tal you pronto."

"Hmmmmm. You reckon he could do it, Oscar?"

The big man shifted his weight from foot to foot and muscle bulged his shirt. His thick neck seemed to disappear as his shaggy blond head lowered.

"Well, that ain't the question now," Matthew Colton said. He spilled the blanket off his knees and rose. "You better herd him in, I guess. I suspect that's my nephew, Oscar, my brother's boy I been expectin'. You tell him I'll be down directly, horns and hoofs and my tail in a curl."

He picked up his coat from the bed, ran stubby fingers through a mane of silver hair.

In time to come Matthew Colton would be a legend in the Blue Hills country. At sixty-odd he could still rife shagtails from the rough string. He could handle a full day in the branding pen, and many a younger rider ate his dust when it came to chousing the mosshorns from the up-and-down bitter-root tangles.

He was a smallish man with a seamed, sharp-featured face split by a drooping mustache. His eyes were keen and alive and he moved spryly. His hands rubbed together slowly now, and his eyelids drooped thoughtfully.

"Damned young idiot!" he muttered. "I'll show him!"

He faced Vern Colton in a long room shelved and piled and cluttered with books. Old Matthew had his books shipped straight from New York and Philadelphia by the box-load. He had slept no more than four hours a night for the past twenty years, rumor had it, and it was nothing extra for him to read a thick volume straight through from dark to morning.

"Took you long enough to git here," he said. "You come by way of Canada, mebbe?"

"Mr. Matthew, he whistles," Vern said, "and all the little puppy dogs start runnin'. I came when it suited my time. You're the one that asked the favor?"

Years had passed since their last meeting, yet neither had attempted greeting nor offered a handshake. Old Matthew crossed to his big desk. He leaned his chin in hand, studying Vern with narrowed eyes. His curling lip lifted his mustache scornfully.

"Still fightin' the firewater," he drawled. "That's what makes you talk so big. Look at you. If you ain't a fine specimen! Why don't you sit down?"

Vern Colton held his whisky well. The effects of it showed only in his eyes, and in the small extra effort that was necessary to pronounce his words distinctly. He pushed a pile of books from a chair—that would rouse the old devil's spleen!—and sat with hat tilted back, legs sprawled.

"Twenty-seven years old," his uncle mocked, "and a stranger'd pass you for a middle-age man. Your reputation hang as heavy as that, does it?"

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"Did you toll me here to ask about my health," Vern said, "or was there somethin' you wanted?"

"Or mebbe," old Matt went on, "she's still got her hooks in you. Jenny—yeah. He can't forget a worthless, triflin' woman!"

That hurt, as was intended. The barbed words sank deep, and Vern Colton's lips tightened. Muscles corded in his neck. But the measure of his control was the steadiness of his answer:

"She's dead, damn you. Don't dig up her grave."

JENNY had been Vern Colton's wife. She was a pretty little girl, gay and laughing, and no flightier than most. She wasn't cut out for a rancher's wife, that's all.

She liked town life and gossip and parties, and instead she'd been faced with the drudgery and loneliness of building up a foothills' spread.

Jenny wasn't all to blame. She'd run off with some fellow who happened along. A year or so back Vern learned she had died—a fever or something, in Albuquerque.

"I speak my mind," Matthew Colton snapped. "Don't I know my own brother's son? Didn't I watch you grow? Are you scared to face the sentimental twaddle that's making you throw your life away?"

"I get along," Vern told him. "I can handle my own affairs. I'm money ahead."

"Bah!" the old man snorted.

"Yes, money!" Vern said quickly. "I'm like you, Uncle Matt; I've learned that money's the thing. It sticks by you, greases the way; it can buy you anything. In time, I reckon, I'll get to be as mean and tight-fisted and crooked and purse-proud as you."

Matt Colton grunted. "How much is it you owe me now?"

"Two thousand eight hundred eighteen dollars—and you'll be paid it, every red cent!"

That had been another sly dig. Vern had borrowed five thousand from his uncle to put into his place on Cold River—the place he'd let fall to pieces after Jenny left him.

They were watching each other with wary calculation, two self-willed, hard-jawed men of the same grim breed, when a voice spoke from the doorway behind them:

"I heard you come down, Mr. Colton. I wondered if there was anything—"

"No, Myra, no," old Matt said quickly. "I didn't mean to rouse you up. Come in, girl. This is the fellow we talked about: my brother's boy."

Vern stood stiffly, swept off his hat.

"Myra writes my letters and keeps the books straight," said his uncle. "Maybe you'll recall her father, Ben Waddell."

Vern glanced at the girl in the small silence that followed. She was in the young twenties and her face had character rather than prettiness. The light from the big swinglamp found golden glints in her brown hair.

Gold-brown—that was the color of Jenny's hair.

"What I got to say will keep the night," Matthew Colton said, "in case you'd condescend to sleep beneath a tight-fisted, crooked, purse-proud roof."

Vern looked at him. "I wouldn't put robbery past you."

"You can use the same old room, I guess. Get a lamp there, Myra, and show him up the hall."

She was moving backward before Vern could protest. He had the instinct to leave, to ride out somewhere, and knew it for foolishness. The ache of the trail was in his bones, and the whisky was lidding his eyes with heaviness.

He stared at his uncle thoughtfully again, then went into the hallway.

The girl was waiting with a lamp. She smiled at him faintly, but he thought he could see a distrust that mixed with curiosity in her level glance.

"You lived here as a boy, didn't you?"

He nodded. As he approached her he realized the unsteadiness of his legs. Despite himself he staggered slightly, clutched for the bannister.

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Her hand moved towards him, and surprise widened her eyes at the cat-quick move which jerked him back from her touch.

He followed the glow of the lamp up the stairs.

CHAPTER III

THE DARK RIDERS

A PASSING storm blew up a little later. Lightning shuttered abaft the hills and distant thunder groaned. Gray clouds hemmed in the moon, blanketed it.

In a room that had roofed his forgotten young dreams, Vern Colton shifted and tossed in sodden sleep, muttering to the shadow shapes of nightmare.

Matthew Colton sat with a thick book of history in his lap, but his thoughts ran far beyond the opened page. He lifted his gnarled, veined hand, looked at it, and his shoulders sagged with his sigh.

Miles away, in Rapid City, a hasty horseman pulled up in front of the Barrelhouse Bar. He sprang down, hurried inside the smoky, noisy, drunken room. His eyes canvassed the crowded bar, searched the jammed tables.

"Lookin' for somebody?" a smooth voice asked.

The horseman wet his lips, stepping back a pace from the tall elegance of Keno McKee. "No," he said. "I—I guess—I don't see him here." He scuttled for the door.

Keno McKee, proprietor of the Barrelhouse, took a heavy watch from the pocket of his embroidered vest, glanced at the hour. He nodded and smiled to a group of four who were pushing through from the gambling rooms at the rear.

"The Elcon Mines quitting for the evening, gents? Did you sting me bad?"

A ruddy, blond man exhibited a sheaf of bills gripped in his fist, laughing.

"Always happy to have your trade, Mr. Gardwell. A winner is advertisement for the house. You aren't staying for the little show that Stella and the girls will put on a little later?"

"Stella seems to be busy right now," Gardwell said. He faced the saloon-man squarely. "I suggested in a little note that she might have time to see me later."

"Ah," said McKee. "You don't believe in the old axioms, then. 'Lucky at cards, unlucky in love'—isn't that what they say?"

"I prefer my own axioms," Gardwell countered. " 'Deeds, not words' is one of them."

McKee's dark eyes followed him to the door. He turned then to the table where Stella sat, aware of the other eyes that looked in the same direction. In any room, he thought, she would be the focus of attraction.

Her face had more than beauty, for the cool mystery that some women possess was also mirrored there. He watched the way she posed herself, in all that smoky din still proudly aloof, and noted the measured breathing that lifted the deep, ripe swell of her bosom.

Her fan slapped down the drunken hand that pawed her shoulder, but her eyes that lifted to the amorous one had more invitation than rebuke in them.

McKee touched the line of his thin mustache, shrugging.

The hurried horseman who had searched the Barrelhouse was still hunting his man along the street. Near the darkened Central Bank he gripped the shoulder of a man who came weaving down the walk.

"Dave!" he whispered. "Listen, man—"

In the mouth of a black gap between buildings he shook the other furiously. "Damn yuh," he cried, "I *got* tuh find 'im! Jarnell's got tuh know! The word just come from Willer Crick that the vigilantes are ridin'!"

He thrust the drunken man contemptuously back, went hastening once more along the street.

But all his haste would serve no purpose now, for out on Willow Creek the blow was striking.

THERE were no more than twelve men in the raiding band, though spreading reports would list the total later as high

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as thirty. Each man was robed in a black slicker that made him a shapeless lump in the saddle.

The intermittent thunder combined with the sweep of wind to deaden the sounds of their approach in the misty darkness.

They surrounded the crude log shack in the clearing, and each man adjusted a bandanna to conceal the lower part of his face.

They operated smoothly, following a prearranged plan. Four of them dismounted and rushed the shack as a dog within set up a furious barking. The scantling they carried rammed the door inward with a single lunge.

"Jim Venable!" one of them roared. "Step out with your hands up!"

But they did not wait. They spilled inside and dragged him out.

He was a lanky, frightened man in stagged-off underwear. He struggled feebly in the grasp of stronger hands, mumbling pleas of protest in a mountaineer whine. A vigilante at the door thrust back the sobbing woman who attempted to follow after him.

A gutter of resinous torches sprang into flame as the ring of horsemen closed in. In the storm-hemmed gloom the swirl of yellow fire painted a macabre scene. The low-crowned hats and shapeless robes of the night riders made them executioners from some medieval legend.

The martyr-prisoner groveled on the trampled earth before them.

"You've been warned, Jim Venable," a deep voice pronounced. "The Cowman's Committee don't want your kind here. This is the second and final notice!"

"But the homestead's mine!" the man cried. "I paid mah money—I done no ha'm! You got no reason tuh single me—"

"Shut him up," said the deep voice. "Give him his needin's!"

A bulky shape stepped forward and an arm rose and fell. A three-tongued lash, metal-studded, bit into Venable's body as he tried to rise.

He screamed out horribly, jerked around, and the lash fell full on his back, sprawling him forward. Like a wounded beast he crawled on hands and knees, blindly fleeing the punishment.

He spilled flat with the third swift slash of the weighted thongs, and bloody welts stained the flannel across his shoulders.

"Twelve!" the deep voice boomed.

Jim Venable's fingers, clawing into the earth, relaxed as the sixth stroke fell. His bare legs jerked in one spasmodic thrash, and he choked off his whimpering moans.

Up went the black arm, and down.

Nine—

And ten. . . .

Perhaps the guard at the door of the shack was careless, or he hadn't wanted to miss the gruesome sport. For suddenly the hunched figure of the woman, Jim Venable's wife, darted between horses and came full into the torchlight.

Her face was wild, insane with terror, and out of her twisted mouth came sobs of animal agony.

She snatched at the lifting lash, and in the same movement she struck with the long blade of the skinning knife, her first-found weapon. The bright steel jabbed at the lasher's face, but his instinctive backward twist gouged it instead into his upper arm. He blasted an oath of pain and surprise and clawed at her. His fingers slid down her throat.

With the butt of his lash he struck her in the face. She tottered back and the flimsy of the single garment she wore ripped away in his grip. She fell with a bloody face, and the gutter of yellow light saw her scrawny nakedness.

"Damn her hell-cat soul!" the lasher cried. He drew back the three-tongued flail, but the deep-voiced leader spurred forward and wrested it from him.

"No!" he growled. "Douse your lights and scatter, men. Report at point agreed."

When the rattle of their going had faded into the brush, the thin sounds of a baby's wail could be heard from the shack's frightened dark. A trembling boy, his face still streaming tears, came running forth to help his mother lift the senseless figure of Jim Venable.

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And the evil of the night was not yet done.

Some time before dawn a group of marauders swept down on old Dode Pascal's little cattle spread, miles north. Dode and his two boys were wakened by the smell of smoke; and when Dode lighted a lantern to investigate, a rifle shot spanged through the window.

The three were penned helpless in the house, raked by spasmodic shooting, while fire roared through their outbuildings.

By morning's light they found a note on a fence post:

This squares for Jim Venable. Take warning we are fighting back. Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.
The Association

"By God, boys," old Dode roared, "we'll scatter the stock back in the brush and let 'em forage. We're fightin' hands from here on, until every last damn' nester is drove out of the country!"

CHAPTER IV

CARTRIDGES FREE

WHEN breakfast was done and his black pipe puffing, Matthew Colton resumed his attack on his nephew. They had adjourned to the bench outside, beneath the big oak.

Vern could see the distorted brown initials that his smaller hand had carved in the trunk, the VC connected he would build into a famous brand some day. Or so a boy had thought.

"We'll stop the bickering now," said his uncle, "and tend to our knitting. You got any notion why I sent you word?"

"For the same reason the monkey needed the cat," said Vern. "To pull your chestnuts out of the fire. I was a fool to come."

"Fool!" old Matthew flared. "You know damned well why you're here. Am I going to live forever? Have I any near kin except yourself? Will you say you never considered the land I own, the money I'll leave? Did you come here out of your great deep love?"

Muscles bulged along Vern's jaws. "Of course I thought of it." He spoke as evenly as he could. "I lay awake nights counting the penny-pinched dollars you'll leave."

Abruptly he jerked to his feet. "Ah, what's the use? Jawing and squabbling—I ran away from it once, and I don't have to stand it again. You know what I think of you and what you've got. You can take your money—"

"Wait, boy!" Matthew took a hasty step after him, gripping his sleeve. "We'll put the personalities aside. This is business. It happens I need a fellow in your new line of trade—a man with a quick fist, a ready gun, and no scruples to hamper him."

He grinned like a cat. "I reckon I could trust you, Vern, a little farther than I'd trust most others of your stripe. That's one point in your favor. Another thing, it would suit my pleasure to see this handled by one of our own name. There's a little question of pride, you see."

"And just what job do you have in mind?"

"I want a man," said Matthew Colton, "to manage my affairs here for a while. I want him to protect my interests until the situation in Blue Rock County straightens out. He'll have full charge and a free hand. It's a dangerous job and I'll pay accordingly."

"My regular price," said Vern, "is ten dollars a day."

"Hmmmm." Matthew frowned. "In my time it was sixty a month and ca'tridges free. Don't you come a little high?"

"To you," Vern told him, "the price is twenty a day."

"Sold," said Matthew quietly. "You're on the payroll, startin' now." He raised his voice to a shout. "Hitch up the team, Oscar! We're goin' in to town."

"Wait," Vern protested. "I meant to say—"

"The deal's closed," said Matthew, "unless you're backin' water on your word."

"I didn't say that. I only meant—well, what's the situation here? Rumors about the county were spreading all along the trail. What's the trouble, anyhow?"

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"That'll come out in the course of things." Matthew rubbed his hands together briskly. "I been waitin' a long, long time to face that nest of buzzards down in town."

VERN came down the stairs, buckling his gun belt, and Myra Waddell smiled at him from the lower hall. She was fresh and young, and the early flowers she had gathered were no brighter than her face.

He thought of the dingy hotels and the boarding houses, and suddenly realized he was staring at her.

"I'm glad you're going to stay," she said. She waited for him to come down, then added softly, "He needs somebody. He's not as strong as he pretends, and I know he's worried. Things are very bad."

"What things? What do you mean?"

"Oscar told the cook that somebody told him there was another flogging last night. There's been fighting ever since the Land Association started moving the nesters in—almost two years."

"Yes, but I don't see—"

"It's the small ranchers that are hurt the most," she said. "I tried to run our place after Dad died, and I know what it is. I was making such a miserable failure that your uncle bought me out." She laughed. "And now I'm one of his stray lambs."

"Yes," said Vern. "I had a little place—" His lips tightened.

"Have things changed much since you were here last?" she said quickly.

She had come with him to the vine-cooled porch. "That was a long while back," he said. "I can count about four additions he's built on the house—well, I ain't looked around yet, hardly.

"Uncle Matt was a great one, in the old days, to complain things were gettin' crowded if a man bought land within twenty miles of him. I'm surprised he's kept the home place here, with Rapid City growing up so big and noisy."

"You comin'?" his uncle hailed from beyond the drive. "It's past eight o'clock already."

"So long," Vern said. How long had it been, he wondered, since he talked to anyone—man or woman—so free and easy?

IT WAS Matthew Colton's pleasure to drive the buckboard team in the early stages, and Vern was bidden to sit beside him.

Oscar rode the rancher's favorite mount, a big strong-jawed buckskin, and led Vern's sorrel. He trailed along fifty feet behind the dust-haze of the wheels.

"A man can't handle any job," Vern said, "unless he knows what the trouble is. What's goin' on around here?"

"Shootin' and burnin'," said Matthew. "Robbery and rustlin' and murder. We've had a little taste of everything."

"But why? What's behind it?"

"Some claim one thing and some another. That's part of your job—to find out."

"But, damn it, you must have some idea—"

"Me? Sure, I got lots of ideas. But people around are too smart to listen to old fogies like me.

"The trouble, you might say, goes back a couple years. Some Kansas company—the Pioneer Land Development, that's the name—decided this territory was ripe for granger settlements. The old Skullbone property, northwards, was the first they bought.

"They let it be known around they were in the market for other acreage, provided they could buy it cheap. In course of time they started to move their hoe-hand families in, and you know what that meant."

"Fences stretched and water holes cut off." Vern nodded. "I wouldn't call that north part any kind of crop country, though."

"Nor any sensible man. They managed to pick up some other parcels here and yonder, of course, and that hacked things some more. They come right out and admitted it wasn't the best crop soil in the world, but as long as they could piece it out to land-hungry pilgrims at a profit—

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well, that was their affair. Them that didn't like it could always sell and vamoose."

"There's a big stink in Montana right now about some such crooked promotion scheme," Vern said as the buckboard lurched. He clutched the side of the seat. "You drive like a greenhorn. You tryin' to hit every rock in the road?"

"I handled a team before you were thought of," his uncle growled. "Greenhorn! Why, I was—"

"All right, all right," Vern muttered. "So the grangers moved in."

"And the usual mess followed," said Matthew. "Beef was butchered and fences cut. There were shootin' scrapes and runins in town. The stockmen formed a committe, and the land company brought gunmen in to head a so-called Protective Association. The way things are fixin' I expect a hot-lead showdown any day."

"And exactly where do you stand? What's the set-up on the Triangle?"

Matthew Colton pursed his lips and widened his bush-browed eyes. He managed to look, Vern thought, like a cross between a sanctimonious gospel-preacher and a bloody old pirate.

"A man that speaks his mind," he said, "is like the Good Book prophet—without honor in his own country. There are folks who don't like my style, boy. I got my enemies."

"And you earned 'em, too, I'll bet," said Vern.

Matthew frowned. "There's been words passed around and threats made," he said. "If I was a younger man I'd know how to handle 'em, but I reckon I'm past the age." He glanced across narrowly. "I'm passin' 'em on to the new boss of the Triangle."

Vern studied him thoughtfully.

"Yes," said Matthew, "I aim to be gone from the county a while. I got other investments around and about, and when a man puts extra irons in the fire he's got to keep watch on 'em, as you know.

"Meanwhile I expect the Triangle will stand right where she's standin' now. She'll steer clear of other folks' trouble—if she can. She'll obey the law as long as others do. But if her hand is forced she'll protect her rights and fight for her own until the last wolf is hung!"

"Are those orders?" Vern asked.

"Orders," said the old man. "You'll see the workings of them when we've called on a few folks in town."

FOR the final miles of the journey Matthew Colton relinquished the buckboard to Oscar and cantered his buckskin beside Vern's sorrel. At intervals he'd call out some landmark, but otherwise each man kept to his own thoughts.

Vern relaxed in the saddle and tried to make his mind a blank. It was a trick the lonely years had taught him. If you concentrated on nothing, if you counted brush clumps along the trail or added the total of cottonwood trees, the miles and hours slid by in monotonous preoccupation.

But today it didn't work.

He thought of the man beside him. He had been in Texas when Matthew Colton's letter caught up with him, and after a glance at the contents he had ripped the message to shreds. But that was bluff. He knew, as old Matthew had known, that he had to answer the call.

He had shipped the sorrel north that evening, and two days later he finished up his business in the Panhandle and turned in his stock-detective badge.

Work was work wherever you found it, so he kept telling himself, and Mr. Matt's money was as good as any man's.

But it was more than that. Matthew Colton had handled the up-bringing of his brother's orphan son for five years. Vern was fifteen when he ran away to make his living on his own.

His uncle was too know-it-all even for a youngster. For everything that came along he had the answer all worked out, the one and only answer. He was mule-headed, Vern was stubborn; there was the whole situation.

But despite it all, regardless of the quarrels and arguments and the times his fin-

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gers had itched for his uncle's neck, Vern had always been aware of the bond of kinship. Yes, and of something deeper than that.

Love the old hellion? He'd have laughed at the thought. But his own words had expressed it nevertheless:

When old Mr. Matthew had whistled, young Vern had come a-runnin'.

And so it was with a strange sensation growing that he topped the last slope and surveyed the sprawl of Rapid City below. Twelve years had multiplied it many times, bloated it beyond his recollection.

He could see the tree-marked square of the old Central Church, but all the rest seemed new. Houses were clustered now on both sides of the narrow river, where the prairie dogs had nested. The tipple and thread of track and angular mine buildings on the opposite bluff seemed to typify the change.

"They'll run the railroad in next," he said.

"There's some that talk of nothin' else."

"How big has she grown?"

"They claim three thousand. Three hundred, I'd say, if you'd cull the riffraff."

They rode on down. The street they entered had lengthened since Vern's day, yet the feel and look of it were somehow the same. Square brick edifices lifted themselves among the familiar wooden fronts, and he counted four hotels that had replaced the old Hollister House.

"They still call it Center Street?" he asked.

"That's about all that hasn't changed."

There were wagons along the street and saddle horses hitched in meager shade. Matthew Colton jerked an occasional nod toward men on the sidewalk, and even grunted greeting now and then.

"We'll put up here at the feed corral," he said. "It may take us a little time. Oscar can pick up the supplies and things Myra wanted."

Vern stepped down, sniffing the pungence of the stables and the dry haze of golden dust that shimmered in the glare of sun. He squinted along the street, turning quickly to the touch of Matthew's fingers on his sleeve.

"You may as well get to know 'em now," his uncle said. "See that fellow by the water trough? He's one you'll have trouble with, the high gun of the land-grabbers' Protective Association. Don't look like much, does he, but they say he's hell on wheels."

Vern nodded gravely, staring at the bulky body of his companion of the Hathaways ambush, the jovial Jarnell.

CHAPTER V

PIECES OF HATE

VERN COLTON shifted the hang of his gun-belt slightly, adjusted the tilt of his battered brown hat. His eyes followed Jarnell as the fat man moved away, the center of a conversational group.

"You cut his sign before?" Matthew said sharply.

"I heard of him." Vern shrugged.

He thought of other towns that had seen him ride in, as today. Of other casual streets and groups of men that paraded under his scrutiny. In your mind you assayed what you felt and observed, tabulating every possible danger, and your next move followed swiftly.

If your man ran, you pursued. If he made a stand, then bullets blasted quick decision. Such was the wolf-killer's way.

Rapid City was no different from a hundred other towns. This business of Matthew Colton's was just another job; you took your chances and you drew your pay.

So he tried to think of it, but there was this growing awareness inside him which would not be downed. He was like a play-actor, he had the feeling, who has been thrust from a familiar stage role into the reality of life.

"Why you glowering at me?" said his uncle. "I only said we'd stop off first at the bank."

In Matthew's sharp blue eyes he read a mocking glint. Mr. Matthew was a hunter who had set his snare and noosed his prey.

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He bowed over-politely to a young woman who emerged from a doorway. "Mornin', honey. What's new today in high ideals and moral uplift and civic betterment?"

Vern withdrew a polite pace, touching his hat. She was a most attractive young woman, in a crisp, mannish shirtwaist and with flaxen hair piled high above a tanned forehead. She drew herself up with a pretty gesture, eyeing Matthew coldly.

"Will you allow me to pass, if you please?"

"Miss Faith is one of these modern girls," said Matthew, grinning. "I'd make you acquainted with my nephew—"

"I believe I told you, Mr. Colton," she said, "that I'd thank you not to speak to me in public. As long as you remain a traitor to your friends, an obstacle to peace and progress, I consider you beneath the notice of any decent person in the county."

"Mort Lennox is to blame," Matthew sighed. "He raised you wrong. He sent you off to fancy schools instead of applyin' the palm of his hand where it belonged. That's why you're so doggone sassy and uppity."

She flushed, flashing a swift glance at Vern. "You—you're simply a vulgarian!"

"She helps her father run the Rapid City *Clarion,*" Matthew said. "All you do, Vern, is agree with what they print and that makes you a smart man. You disagree and you're a blind old mossback."

"That isn't true!" Faith Lennox flared. "We're backing the railroad because it would benefit everybody. It would mean progress, development. It's only the biased, bigoted, self-satisfied few like Matthew Colton who hide their heads, like ostriches, and refuse to see—"

"I've got nothin' against the railroads," Matthew said. "I only say it's as cheap for me to drive my beef to the Junction and ship from there."

"For *you,* yes; but what of the hundreds of others who make their living from their crops, from the mines? Must all Rapid City suffer because you choose, for your own reasons, to block the right of way?"

"I never noticed any grangers or miners," Matthew said dryly, "who lost much sleep in worry over me. You and your father and your paper are being used, I tell you. I don't aim to be anybody's fool."

The burning anger of her glance flashed upon Vern as well. "There's no fool like an old fool," she said, turning quickly away.

"Hmmmmm." Matthew rubbed his lean jaw. "Pretty though, ain't she?"

"I see you're still as popular as ever," said Vern.

THEY turned into the coolness of the Central Bank, a refurbished symbol of the new order of things in Rapid City. Matthew led him past busy clerks and the grilled cages of the tellers, to a railed-off section at the rear.

The door of the office beyond was plainly marked *Private* but Matthew thrust it open without a warning knock.

A lean man in funereal black jerked his feet from a flat desk and turned angrily. "What does this—oh, good afternoon, Matthew!" He rose to a lean height, extended his hand. "What can I do for you?"

"I just dropped in," said Matthew, "to draw every cent of my money out of this place. This is my nephew, Vern. If you're smart, Vern, you'll count your fingers after shaking hands with Adam Harkness."

The banker's long face exhibited a variety of expressions. His frown changed to a doubtful smile, to puzzlement and finally to frozen blankness.

"I want my account transferred," Matthew said, "to the Drovers' Exchange in Jefferson. You fix the drafts and papers up right away."

Adam Harkness moved his lips in silent mutterings before words came from them. "But what's wrong, Matthew? What do you mean? I don't understand—"

"I mean I want my money where it's safe. Where I know what it's being used for. Where there isn't a lot of backhanded monkey business goin' on."

"But I—"

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"Do I get it or don't I?" Matthew said.

Harkness lost his control. "The Central Bank could buy and sell you ten times over!" he rasped. "Take your account, and good riddance. Your business has never been worth the slurs and insinuations and abuse."

"High time you found it out," said Matthew. "You stir up your pen-pushers and get the papers ready."

Harkness strode past them, jerked open the door and slammed it bangingly behind him. Somewhere along the line of his angry rush, however, his temper must have cooled. In a space of seconds he opened the door gently, gestured with open hand.

"This is no way to do business," he said. "Damn it, Matthew, you have a genius for making me lose my head. Now what's all this about? I tell you frankly, I don't want to see an account the size of yours fly out the window. We've handled your banking for thirty years—"

"Your brother did," Matthew corrected. "*He* used the bank funds to promote local interests. *He* gave his customers sound advice. *He* wasn't any jaw-waggin', string-pullin' politico."

"Now, Matthew, be reasonable. Do I try to tell you how to run the Triangle?"

The little rancher grunted. "Four-five stockmen told me you sent word you couldn't carry 'em any longer."

"And how can I, in the circumstances? Look what all this trouble has done to land values. I've advised them to be sensible, that's all. I believe the old free-grazing days in the Blue Hills are petering out, Matthew. I hold no brief for either side, mind you, in this cattle-granger squabble, but I maintain you can't solve modern problems by the old-fashioned rule of thumb."

"Then we'll use the rule of trigger-finger," Matthew said. "I'm drawin' my money out of here. We'll drop back in an hour, say, and you have the papers fixed. Vern, here—Vern Colton—is ramroddin' my affairs for a while. Any business concerns the ranch, you take it up with him."

Harkness turned a keen glance to the younger man. He wet his thin lips, let his shoulders sag.

"The withdrawal papers will be ready," he said. "I warn you though, Matthew, that if any unfounded rumors are started, if the good name of the bank is impunged, you'll regret your hastiness. There's law in this county now, you know. Your old hell-roaring vigilante days went out with the buffalo herds."

Matthew cackled. "I smell sheep," he said to Vern, and jerked his head.

"What's Harkness up to?" Vern said as they reached the street again.

"That's one of the things for you to find out," said his uncle. "Speakin' of the law Adam mentioned, here comes two fine specimens of it."

ONE of the men who approached was small, shriveled, nervous. His chin moved rhythmically and his gray mustache was frayed with tobacco brown.

The other, Vern thought, was swarthy enough to be an Indian breed: a stolid, square-chinned man who walked as if intent upon some urgent purpose.

Matthew Colton waited them near the porch of the Travelers' Hotel, and the sharp bite of his scorn wasted no preliminary:

"Meet the law of Rapid City, Vern," he said, his voice carrying so that all the loiterers could hear. "Wink Beecher's deputy for the high sheriff from the county seat, and walkin' proof of how politics can always whittle out a square peg for a round hole. The other 'un's named Unger, he claims, and he totes a tin badge likewise."

The stolid man came to a military halt. His black eyes seemed to have no pupils, and the gaze of them went swiftly to Vern.

"Clay Unger, city marshal," he announced. "We've heard of you in town, Colton. This is notice we keep a cage for any wolf that's cut loose here. You savvy?"

"You can rustle cattle," Matthew drawled, "or burn barns or horsewhip your neighbors, but it's worth your hide to spit on the sidewalks of Rapid City."

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Vern let a small silence develop. His glance dismissed Wink Beecher, surveyed the swarthy Unger from flat back hat to silver-studded boots. He smiled mockingly.

"I keep my wolf at heel," he said, "and give the dogs first bite. I warn you though, when I cut him loose he makes short work of the common run of mongrels."

His bald reference was a slap in the face, a deliberate challenge. Wing Beecher made a hasty backward step, gulping hard. Muscle bulged along the bone of Clay Unger's squared jaw. His eyes widened, narrowed, and his hand moved with a spasmodic jerk, fingers clawed.

Vern Colton made one swift forward step, striking in a blur of motion. His fist traveled in a short, explosive arc, and Unger's head seemed lifted by the jolt of it. He sat down hard, arms and legs spread, and his upper body sagged.

But he came lurching up before the dust of his fall could settle. His eyes were glazed and he breathed with a rasp through gaping mouth. Again his fingers spread; then suddenly his arms drooped limply.

Vern Colton was posed with body slightly bent, with head jutting, with hand hovering inches above the black butt of his holstered .38. His steady stare held Wink Beecher frozen and stopped Unger as if the swart marshal had collided with an invisible wall.

"You better have 'em fix that hole in the street," Vern said softly. "A man might break his neck there, Unger, stumblin' in like you did."

The marshal seemed not to hear. His tongue licked the corner of his mouth, and he turned abruptly. With Wink Beecher at his elbow he marched stolidly back along a street where a motionless hush watched his coming. He turned a right oblique into a narrow alley.

"You hit quite a lick," said Matthew Colton dryly. "In my day, though, they'd call it risky to match a man's draw with a punch."

"I had the edge," Vern said. "I knew what I was goin' to do, and he couldn't quite make his mind up."

"They claim Clay Unger's a dangerous man," said Matthew, "and that many a back-shot's notched on his gun. You've made a bad enemy."

"Wasn't that what you wanted?" Vern asked. "I thought I hired out at gun-hand's pay. That little run-in—it's part of the system I've worked out. You announce yourself with a bang, and sometimes the rats scare out of the holes."

"Rapid City runs more to rattlers," his uncle said. "Don't chaw too big a bite off, boy."

Vern eyed him. "What else have you been doin' here but stir up rattlers' nests? The only reason we came to town was so you could hand me out a public present of all your hates and troubles."

"That's it," said Matthew calmly. "And naturally I've saved the worst ones for last. When we've finished tellin' off Mr. Keno McKee, and the Land Association, you'll have some idea of the work you'll do to earn our twenty dollars a day."

CHAPTER VI

THE DEAD DROP DOWN

THERE were small things Vern Colton noted in the course of the day which revealed the mood and temper of Rapid City. Men passed other men on the walks with wary regard, measuring careful elbow-room. They spoke together cautiously on shaded porches and at the bars, turning to survey each newcomer, and halting conversation at the approach of strangers.

Beneath the surface calmness of every-day affairs the troubles of this Blue Hill country were a swirling turbulence, thinly iced. The conflicting greeds and counter purposes had created a depth of enmity which might erupt destruction at any moment.

That danger held a tight rein on every man—with the glaring exception of Matthew Colton.

The spry little boss of the Triangle seemed to find a sour relish in the hair-trigger state of affairs. He was a swaggering banty fighting cock, crowing challenge.

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He was a small boy with a big flaming torch, Vern thought, hunting a stray dog in a dynamite-stocked powderhouse.

But as the pattern developed, as incident followed harsh incident, Vern began to see the method behind Mr. Matthew's sly game. He was publicly announcing the enlistment of his fighting strength in the coming Blue Hills war.

They encountered Oscar along the street, and Matthew led the way to the Barrelhouse Saloon. He surveyed the scattering of drinkers and loiterers, tapping a coin on the bar. He ordered whisky, pleased with the silent pause that his presence spread in the barnlike place.

He filled the glasses carefully from the bottle, and as carefully emptied them on the floor. He locked his hands behind his back, turning to face the room.

"I've given orders, Vern," he said sharply, "that any Triangle rider seen in this place will be handed his time. I'd recommend you keep that rule in effect while you're in charge. It's a sore spot. It don't belong in this town."

Vern saw the two at the table toward which his speech was directed. He noticed the man only casually, for his eyes were held by the sheer beauty of the woman. Her face had the unreality that artists paint. She was too flawless. He drew a slow breath, watching her.

"There's been statements come out of this place," said Matthew Colton, "of the come-uppance I'd get if I wasn't such a splindlin', snag-tooth, old weakling. It's been claimed I'd sing a different tune if I didn't have my infirmities to hide behind. There's been quite some dust kicked on the Colton name, which is why it pleased me to leave the Triangle in charge of one of the family."

THE man who came forward from the side table was tall, dark, composed. The black gambler's coat he wore gave him deceptive thinness, and the pallor of his long features withdrew attention from their strength.

But Vern saw the spring in his stride, the set of his shoulders, the boned bigness of his white hands.

"I can't say you are welcome in my place, Mr. Colton," he said, "but I am pleased to see you face to face. You have gone out of your way to hurt my business.

"Because of your"—his shoulder lifted—"your age and your standing in the community I've allowed you to make unfounded statements that would have required a sharp and vigorous retort to a lesser man."

"One of those educated card-sharps, eh?" said Matthew. "Name of Keno McKee, Vern. He's been runnin' here around a year."

McKee's eyes were a brown that was almost black. They met Vern's blue stare with calculation. "I heard of you in Tascosa," he said. "A friend of mine, Pat Landreau, used to live there."

"I turned Pat over to the Arizona law," Vern answered. "It was no affair of mine that they hung him."

McKee turned to Matthew. "I was about to ask, Mr. Colton, if you'd care to name your reasons for blackguarding my place?"

"I was asked my opinion and gave it," said Matthew. "I throw my own gamblin' and drinkin' trade, such as is, to men I've known and trusted over the years."

The saloonman's thin mustache lifted with his smile. "That's your privilege. But why not live and let live?"

"A few years back," said Matthew, "you were dealing faro in Kansas City for so much a week. Where would you get the money all at once to buy this place from Handrahan?"

"Can't a gambler get lucky?" McKee spoke quickly. "My money is my own affair."

Matthew's lean shoulders shrugged. "There's more than one puncher been kicked through your door when his roll was spent and his liquor got loud. Winners at your tables have been robbed as they rode from town. The tough strangers that drift along make this place their hangout, and your alley out behind has seen four murders done."

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"Do I run a Sunday school?" McKee demanded. "Can you name another place that doesn't have trouble now and then? Can you show one shred of evidence that any of my people have had a thing to do with robberies or killings you talk about?"

"Where do you stand, McKee?" Matthew countered. "Do you side with the nesters or the ranchers or what?"

McKee produced a watch-chain instrument and clipped the end from a long cigar. "I'm following your example," he said slowly. "I'm sitting on the fence while they fight it out. Unfortunately, I haven't the money you have. I can't wait until the fighting's over, and then buy the losers' land at one-third its value."

"I've heard that remark's been goin' around, and I wondered where it started." Matthew grinned wryly. "Well, we just dropped in so Vern could see for himself how the land lays around here. As my representative, he takes over all the little problems of the Triangle, to handle in any fashion he sees fit."

He glanced at Vern, blandly innocent. McKee struck a match with his thumbnail, waiting with lifted brow.

THE issue was not clear, but Vern's instinct was to follow his uncle's lead. If the waspy little devil had some hidden reason to seek an embroilment here, Vern was willing to back his play.

"As far as I'm concerned," he said, "the Triangle hands can find their amusement in town wherever they choose. If any man starts a private quarrel, here or some other place, that's his own affair.

"But if he's picked on, or cheated, or mistreated, and the local law doesn't see he gets his just dues, then the kit and caboodle of the Triangle will step in and take care of it."

McKee shrugged. He showed his awareness of Vern's steady gaze toward Stella by shifting his body to block the line of vision. "A good working definition of what is known as gun law," he said. "And spoken by an eminent practitioner."

Vern lifted his voice slightly. "Personally, I expect you'll see me around your place right often, McKee." He moved so that his eyes met the woman's. "I like the atmosphere."

She smiled at him coolly. "The rule of the house," she called across, "is to make things pleasant for our customers."

McKee flicked ash from his cigar.

Matthew Colton cleared his throat as he turned to go, and the sight of hulking Oscar may have suggested his final barb.

"Some of the boys been sayin', McKee, that back in Kansas you were considered quite some shakes as a rough-and-tumble man. They claim you could make short work of even as tough a fellow as Oscar."

The saloonman's jaw was set. "I seem to be following your example even there, sir," he said. "In these days I delegate the brawling. There are four or five thick-shouldered and thick-headed bruisers I keep around to handle the fisticuffs.

"I also have a man—a pity he isn't here right now—as a consulting expert in gunnery."

He looked at Vern. "He's a newcomer, like yourself. Arrived just recently. I think his name—yes, that's it—Bucky Landreau."

Vern nodded politely toward the woman at the table. "Good afternoon, ma'am. I trust I'll have the pleasure later."

"They say," McKee said sharply, "that Bucky's twice the man his brother was."

"Come on here, Oscar!" Matthew called. "Suppose he did call you thick-headed, you never mind that. I've got cash I'd lay on the line that no fancy tinhorn alive could lick one side of you if it came to boots and bare knuckles."

Oscar grunted.

Matthew turned to Vern outside. "I see you noticed the way to rile him was to play up to his fancy woman. He didn't like that a minute."

"You started it," Vern said. "I just kept the ball a-rolling."

"What about this Bucky Landreau?"

"I was lucky to get the drop on P[illegible] I heard his brother was a faster shot, a[illegible] trickier. You didn't go tellin' around he[illegible]

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did you, that you were sending word to me?"

"I may have mentioned it," Matthew said hastily. "I'll drop back over to the bank, I guess. See you in five-ten minutes."

VERN went slowly along with Oscar, vaguely aware of his huge companion's restrained hostility. Oscar didn't like him; Oscar remembered the drunken, blow-hard talk that had announced Vern's arrival at the Triangle.

A bad business, that, and no easy way to remedy it now. He damned the whisky and his own crawling weakness.

Would he have to fight them again tonight—the jittering jumps?

He was cool now, utterly relaxed. His mind was recounting the events of the day, measuring and weighing them.

It had pleased Matthew to fan the sleeping flames of Rapid City and thrust his nephew into the limelight of them. His sharp mind had devised some devious scheme, and no one would know the purposes behind his plans until Mr. Matthew chose to reveal them.

Such was Matthew Colton's way, and Vern was content to let events develop. The inner sensation that this was more than a day's work—that he had some remote personal stake in the crux of things to come—was a warming satisfaction he had not known in years.

Not since the dreams had soured. Not since Jenny's day.

So he thought, strolling Center Street with Oscar at his elbow, with the afternoon sun hot above and Rapid City beginning to rouse from the hush of siesta. An aimless idler, he seemed, but his trained perceptions were sharply awake to each faint sound from the buildings they passed, to each flick of movement in the shadows.

He startled Oscar by turning suddenly, staring across the street behind them. The girl on the sidewalk waved again.

He went across to where Faith Lennox waited in the shadowed doorway of the *Clarion* office. He touched his hat with grave courtesy.

"I want to apologize, Mr. Colton," she said. "I was very rude. It's no excuse, really, but your uncle always seems able to make my temper flare."

Vern smiled. "He's been doin' the same to me for years."

"I understand that you are to have charge of the Triangle," she said, "while he's busy with the court fight in Jefferson. I merely wanted to say that I hope you will give the situation here a thorough study before engaging in any of the local squabbles. We have our troubles, yes, but common sense can still settle them short of violence."

Vern stood with his back to the street, and now he shifted position to the left. She was a right pretty girl, and framed against the wide shadowed window of the newspaper office she represented the transition in Western womanhood.

The day of the genteel ladies, the cloistered housewives, was fading now. The Faith Lennoxes could meet a man eye to eye and talk his own language.

"If Uncle Matt brought me in as a peace-maker," he said frankly, "he's handlin' things in a funny way. All he's been spreading is war talk, which is along my regular line of business."

Her blue eyes narrowed as he moved slightly once more. "We've heard of you as a peace officer, Mr. Colton," she said. "We'd like to think of you in that capacity. Rapid City, I'm afraid, already has its fill of gun-hands and cutthroats and common ruffians. Will you stop and talk with my father some day, and let him explain—"

She gasped at the bewildering suddenness of Vern's move. She lifted a hand to ward him away, and a startled scream rose into her throat. One instant he had been a politely attentive listener, standing indolently there, and in an eye's swift wink he had become an apparent madman.

He lurched his shoulder at her and his jabbing hand swept her off her feet, spilled her backwards upon the floor of the *Clarion's* narrow entrance.

In the same whirl of motion he threw

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himself in the opposite direction, twisting to face the street and falling flat upon the pine walk. Before his hat had fluttered beside him, the revolver in his outthrust fist began to blast.

Glass crashed, the windows rattled, the street resounded to a deafening roar. . . .

THE plot to shoot Vern Colton down had been hastily hatched, but there was cunning in the outline of it and bold efficiency b ythose who undertook the work.

The men in the Pioneer Hotel said later that Bucky Landreau had been loitering near the entrance, watching across the street where Vern stood talking with his back innocently turned.

Suddenly, in apparent response to some unobserved signal, the hare-lipped gunman had darted through the door, crossed the porch in hurried strides, gone angling toward his victim. His pistol was in his hand as he stepped off the sidewalk.

By all the odds Vern Colton was a gone goose right then.

Some maintained that Bucky's mistake was in trying to make the kill look good. He was too sure of the murder setup. Apparently he aimed to hail his man in another closer stride, and shoot him down as he turned in surprise, cold turkey.

But it didn't quite work out that way.

For Vern Colton's caution gave him eyes in the back of his head. As he talked to Faith Lennox he had shifted position to observe the street behind in the dark mirror that the window of the *Clarion* office afforded.

He had seen Bucky coming there, and his counter-move was instant.

He was flattened out and firing as Bucky's gun shifted toward him. His first bullet smashed into the thigh of the hare-lipped man, sagging him with the impact of it and causing him to shoot wild into the *Clarion* window.

His second slug inched higher, into Bucky's midriff, and the third caught him in the throat as he fell.

But even in his dying topple, Bucky Landreau almost paid off his brother's debt of vengeance. He wabbled a shot as he collapsed, a desperation bullet that missed Vern's head by inches, gouging into the packed earth of the street. A miss—but it spewed a dusty splatter into Vern's face, blinding him.

He rolled frantically, pawing at his eyes, for already he was aware that this swift-breaking murder scheme had not solely depended on Bucky Landreau. The pointing arm of some watcher down the street had warned him of danger from the flank.

He gathered himself to a crouch, eyes streaming agony, and turned his weapon toward a watery confusion.

Through the blinding fog he heard the boom of a voice, and he pawed at the stinging tears, jerking toward it. Dimly he made out a bulky figure, queerly aproned and with face whitely distorted.

He heard a double blast of explosion. His blurred vision recognized the aproned shouter as Jarnell, and simultaneously he saw the fat man's arm jerk forward again. His fist gripped a revolver butt and the tilted barrel of the weapon was leveling in Vern's direction.

Vern swung his own gun toward this new target, but some reasoning instinct saved him from grotesque error in the very moment that his finger squeezed trigger. His hand jumped, and his bullet whammed off at a high tangent, harmless.

He swept a hand across his eyes, turning in the direction of Jarnell's stare. Some object clattered upon the sidewalk boards at his left, and a heavier, sodden thump followed almost instantly.

He blinked at a shotgun that had fallen from a window above, and at the huddle of a body beside it. Even half blinded eyes could see, now, what Jarnell had been about.

The fat man had returned the compliment. He had shot the bushwhacker in the upper window who had been backing Bucky Landreau's attack with a riot-gun. The dead man on the walk was the swarthy city marshal, Clay Unger.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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It was one horse too much. Henry broke and ran, with Jake close at his heels. The ponies took after them happily

Novelet

Miracle on Main Street

By ROBERT ARTHUR

Author of "If You But Wish," "Footsteps Invisible," etc.

Wishes are Mongolian ponies; beauty is as beauty thinks; all is not gold that flitters. And a child shall mislead them, singing in his sleep, "Little town you've had a busy day"

I

DANNY was crouched on the stairs, listening to the grown-ups talk in the living room below. He wasn't supposed to be there. He was supposed to be in bed, since he was still recovering from the chicken pox.

But it got lonely being in bed all the time, and he hadn't been able to resist slipping out and down in his wool pajamas, to hear Dad and Mom, and Sis and Uncle Ben and Aunt Anna talking.

Dad—he was Dr. Norcross, and everybody went to him when they were sick—and the others were playing bridge. Sis,

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who was in high school, was studying her Latin, not so hard she couldn't take part in the conversation.

They were mostly talking about other people in Locustville, which was such a small town most everybody knew everybody else, well enough to talk about them anyway.

"Locustville!" That was Mom, with a sigh. 'I know it's a pretty town, with the river and the trees and the woods around it, and Tom has a good practice here, but the people! If only something would shake some of them out of themselves, and show them how petty and malicious and miserable they are!"

"Like Nettie Peters," Dad said, his tone dry. Danny knew Miss Peters. Always hurrying over to some neighbor's to talk about somebody. Whisper-whisper-whisper. Saying nasty things. "She's the source of most of the gossip in this town. If ever there was a woman whose tongue was hinged in the middle and wagged at both ends, it's her."

Uncle Ben laughed.

"Things would be better here," he remarked. "if the money were better distributed. If Jacob Earl didn't own or have a mortgage on half the town, there might be more free thought and tolerance. But nobody in debt to him dares open his mouth."

"Funny thing," Dad put in, "how some men have a knack of making money at other men's expense. Everything Jacob Earl touches seems to mint money for him—money that comes out of someone else's pocket. Like that gravel land he got from John Wiggins. I'd like to see the process reversed sometime."

"But for real miserliness"—that was Aunt Anna, indignant—"Luke Hawks takes all the prizes. I've seen him come into the Fair-Square store to buy things for his children, and the trouble he had letting go his money, you'd have thought it stuck to his fingers!"

"It's a question," Dad said, "which is worse, miserliness or shiftlessness. Miserliness, I suppose, because most shiftless people are at least good-hearted. Like Henry Jones. Henry wishes for more things and does less to get them than any man in Christendom. If wishes were horses, Henry would have the biggest herd this side of the Mississippi."

"Well, there are some nice people in Locustville," Sis broke into the conversation. "I don't care what that old gossip Miss Peters says, or that stuck-up Mrs. Norton either; I think Miss Avery, my English and gym teacher, is swell. She isn't awful pretty, but she's nice.

"There's little silver bells in her voice when she talks, and if that Bill Morrow whose dad owns the implement factory, and who takes time off to coach the football team wasn't a dope, he'd have fallen for her long ago. She's crazy about him, but too proud to show it, and that silly Betty Norton has made him think he's wonderful by playing up to him all the time."

"If he marries Betty," Aunt Anna said, "the town won't be able to hold Mrs. Norton any more. She's already so puffed up with being the wife of the bank president and the leader of the town's social life, she'd just swell up a little more and float away like a balloon if she got the Morrow Implement Company for a son-in-law."

Everybody laughed, and the conversation slowly died away.

Mom mentioned how much she disliked that two-faced Minerva Benson who was so nice to people's faces and worked against them behind their backs.

Sis said that Mr. Wiggins, who ran the bookstore, was a nice little man who ought to marry Miss Wilson, the dressmaker, a plain little woman who would be as pretty as a picture if she *looked* the way she *was*.

But he never would, Sis said, because he hadn't any money and would be ashamed to ask a woman to marry him when he couldn't even earn his own living.

THEN they went back to bridge. Danny was feeling sort of weak and shaky, so he hurried back to bed before Mom could catch him. He crawled in and pulled the blankets up over him, and then his hand

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reached under the pillow and pulled out the funny thing he'd found in the old chest where he kept his games and skates and things.

It had been wrapped in a soft piece of leather, and he had found it in a little space behind one of the drawers. There was a name inked on the leather, *Jonas Norcross*. Dad's grandfather had been named Jonas, so it might have been originally his.

What the thing was was a little pointed piece of ivory, sharp at the tip and round at the bottom, as if it had been sawed off the very end of an elephant's tusk.

Only there was a fine spiral line in it, like in a snail's shell, that made Danny think maybe it hadn't come from an elephant, but from an animal he had seen in a book once—an animal like a horse, with one long horn over its nose. He couldn't remember the name.

It was all yellow with age, and on the bottom was carved a funny mark, all cross lines, very intricate. Maybe it was Chinese writing. Jonas Norcross had been captain of a Clipper ship in the China trade, so maybe it might have come all the way from China.

Lying in bed, Danny held the bit of ivory in his hand. It gave out a warmth to his fingers that was nice. Holding it tight, he thought of a picture in his book about King Arthur's Round Table—a picture of Queen Guinevere of the golden hair. Probably it was a picture like that Sis had meant Miss Wilson ought to be pretty as.

Grown-ups' talk wasn't always easy to understand, the way they said things that weren't so.

Danny yawned. Gee, though, it would be awful funny— He yawned again, and the weight of drowsiness descending on him closed his eyes. But not before one last thought had floated through his mind.

As it came to him, a queer little breeze seemed to spring up in the room. It fluttered the curtains and rattled the window shade. For just a second Danny felt almost as if somebody was in the room with him. Then it was gone, and smiling at his amusing thought, Danny slept.

II

HENRY JONES woke that morning with the smell of frying bacon in his nostrils. He yawned and stretched, comfortably. There was a clock on the bureau the other side of the room, but it was too much trouble to look at it.

He looked at where the sunshine, coming in the window, touched the carpet. That told him it was just onto nine.

Downstairs pans were rattling. Martha was up and about, long ago. And just about ready to get impatient with him for lingering in bed.

"Ho *huuuum!*" Henry yawned, and pushed down the covers. "I wish I was up an' dressed aw-ready."

As if it were an echo to his yawn, a shrill whickering sound reached him from the direction of his large, untidy backyard. Disregarding it, Henry slid into his trousers and shirt, his socks and shoes, put on a tie, combed his hair casually, and ambled down to the dining room.

"Well!" his wife, Martha, commented tartly, appearing in the doorway with a platter in her hands as he slumped down into his chair. "It's after nine. If you're going to look for work today, you should have been started long ago!"

Henry shook his head dubiously as she set the bacon and eggs in front of him.

"I dunno if I ought to go tramping around today," he muttered. "Don't feel so well. Mmm, that looks good. But I kind of wish we could have sausage oncet in a while."

From the rear yard came another high whinny that went unnoticed.

"Sausage is expensive," Martha told him. "When you get an honest job, maybe we can afford some."

"There's Hawks," Henry remarked, with interest, peering out the front window as a lean, long-faced man strode past the house, with a pleasant but shabbily-dressed little woman trotting meekly at his side.

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"Guess Millie has talked him into laying out some money for new things for the kids at last. It's only about once a year she gets him to loosen up."

"And then you'd think, to look at him, he was dying," his wife commented, "just because he's buying a couple of pairs of two-dollar shoes for two as nice youngsters as ever lived. He begrudges them every mouthful they eat, almost."

"Still," Henry said, wagging his head wisely, "I wish I had the money he has stacked away."

From the rear yard came a sound of galloping hooves. Martha was too intent on scolding Henry to notice it.

"Wish, wish, wish!" she stormed. "But never work, work, work! Oh, Henry, you're the most exasperating man alive!"

"Martha, I'm not worthy of you," Henry sighed. "I wish you had a better husband. I mean it."

This time the whinnying behind the house was a concerted squeal from many throats, too loud to go unnoticed. Henry's buxom wife started, looked puzzled, and hurried out to the kitchen. A moment later her screech reached Henry's ears.

"Henry! The back yard's full of horses! Plunging and kicking all over the place!"

THE news was startling enough to overcome Henry's early-morning lethargy. He joined his wife at the kitchen window and stared with popping eyes at the big rear yard.

It was full—anyway, it seemed full—of animals. Martha had called them horses. They weren't exactly horses. But they weren't ponies either. They were too small to be the one and too big to be the other. And they were covered with longish hair, had wild flowing manes, and looked strong and savage enough to lick their weight in tigers.

"Well, I'll be deuced!" Henry exclaimed, his round countenance vastly perplexed. "I wish I knew where those critters came from."

"Henry!" Martha wailed, clutching his arm. "Now there's five!"

There had been four of them, trotting about the yard, nosing at the wreck of the car Henry had once driven, thumping with their hooves the board fence that penned them in. But now there were, indeed, five.

"G-gosh!" Henry gulped, his Adam's apple working up and down. "We must have counted wrong. Now, how do you suppose they got in there?"

"But what kind of horses are they, Henry?" Martha asked, holding to his arm still, as if for protection, in a way she hadn't for years. "And who do you suppose they belong to?"

Henry put an arm around Martha's plump waist and applied a reassuring pressure.

"I wish I knew, Martha," he muttered, "I wish I knew."

"Henry!" There was real fright in his wife's voice. "Now there's six!"

"Seven," Henry corrected weakly. "The other two just—just sort of appeared."

Together they gazed at the seven shaggy ponies that were trotting restlessly about the yard, nosing at the fence as if seeking escape from the limited space.

No more appeared; and seeing the number remain staple, Henry and Martha gained more self-possession.

"Henry," his wife said with severity, as if somehow blaming him, "there's something queer happening. Nobody ever saw horses like those in Indiana before."

"Maybe they belong to a circus," Henry suggested, staring in fascination at the seven uncouth beasts.

"Maybe they belong to us!"

"Us?" Henry's jaw dropped. "How could they belong to us?"

"Henry," his wife told him, "you've got to go out and see if they're branded. I remember reading anybody can claim a wild horse if it hasn't been branded. And those are wild horses if I ever saw any."

Of course, Martha never *had* seen any wild horses, but her words sounded logical. Her husband, however, made no motion toward the back door.

"Listen," he said, "Martha, you stay here and watch. Don't let anybody into

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the yard. I'm going to get Jake Harrison, at the stable. He used to be a horse trader. He'll know what those things are and if they belong to us, if anybody does."

"All right, Henry," his wife agreed—the first time he could remember her agreeing with him in, anyway, two years—"but hurry. Please do hurry."

"I will!" Henry vowed; and without even snatching up his hat, he shot away.

JAKE HARRISON, the livery stable owner, came back with him unwillingly, half dragged in Henry's excitement. But when he stood in the kitchen and stared out at the yard full of horses, his incredulity vanished.

"Good Lord!" he gasped. "Henry, where'd you get 'em?"

"Never mind that," Henry told him. "Just tell me, what *are* they?"

"Mongolian ponies," the lanky horse dealer informed him. "The exact kind of ponies old Ghengis Khan's men rode on when they conquered most of the known world. I've seen pictures of them in books. Imagine it! Mongolian ponies here in Locustville!"

"Well," Martha asked, with withering scorn, "aren't you going out to see if they're branded? Or are you two men afraid of a lot of little ponies?"

"I guess they won't hurt us," the stable owner decided, "if we're careful. Come on, Henry, let's see if I'm still any good at lassoing. Mis' Jones, can I use this hank of clothesline?"

Henry opened the kitchen door and followed Jake Harrison out into the yard. At their advent the seven—he was glad to see the number hadn't changed in his absence—ponies stopped their restless trotting and lifted their heads to stare at the men.

Jake made a noose out of the clothesline and began to circle it above his head. The ponies snorted and reared, suspiciously. Picking the smallest one, the tall man let the noose go, and it settled over the creature's thick neck.

The pony's nostrils flared. It reared and beat the air with its unshod front hooves as the other six broke and scampered to the opposite end of the yard.

Jake Harrison drew the loop tight and approached the pony, making soothing sounds. It quieted, and as they came close let Jake put his hands on it.

"Yes, sir," the stable owner exclaimed, "a real honest-to-Homer Mongolian pony. That long hair is to keep the cold out, up in the mountains of Tibet. Now let's see if there's any brand. None on its hide. Let's see its hoof."

The pony let him lift its left forefoot without protest, and Henry, bending close, let out a whoop.

"Look, Jake!" he yelled. "It's branded! With my name! These critters are mine!"

Together they stared. Cut into the hard horn, in neat letters, was HENRY JONES.

Jake straightened.

"Yours, all right," he agreed. "Now, Henry, stop making a mystery and tell me where these animals came from."

Henry's jubilance faded. He shook his head.

"Honest, Jake, I don't know. I wish I did. . . . *Look out!*"

The tall man leaped back. Between them an eighth pony had appeared, so close that its flanks brushed against them

"W-where—" Jake stuttered, backing away toward the door in the fence and fumbling for the catch. "Where—"

"That's what I don't know!" Henry joined him. "That's what I wish— No, I don't either! I don't wish anything at all!"

The phantom pony that had appeared directly before them, wispy and tenuous as darkish smoke, promptly vanished.

Henry mopped his face.

"Did you see what I saw?" he asked; and Jake, swallowing hard, nodded.

"You st-started to wish for something, and it st-started to appear," he gobbled, and thrust open the door in the board fence. "Let's get out o' here."

"When I started to wish— Oh, jiminy crickets!" Henry groaned. "That's how the others happened. When I wished. Do you suppose— Do you—"

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Pale-faced, they stared at each other. Slowly the stableman nodded.

"Lord!" the ashen Henry whispered. "I never believed such a thing could happen. I wish now I'd never—"

This time the words weren't fully out of his mouth before the ninth pony struck the earth with a sudden plop directly before them.

It was too much. Henry broke and ran, and Jake followed at his heels. The pony, interestedly, chased them. Its brothers, not to be left behind, streamed through the opening in the fence, whickering gleefully.

When Henry and Jake brought up, around the corner of the house, they were just in time to look back and see the last of the beasts trotting out into Main Street. Nine wicked whinnys cut through the morning quiet. Nine sets of small hooves pounded.

"They're stampeding!" Henry shrilled. "Jake, we got to round 'em up before they do lots of damage. Oh, Jehosephat, I wish this hadn't ever happened!"

Neighing raucously, the tenth pony kicked up its heels, throwing dirt in their faces, and set off at a gallop after the others.

III

ABOUT the time Henry Jones was running for Jake Harrison, Luke Hawks was fingering a boy's woolen suit with lean, predatory digits.

"This be the cheapest?" he asked, and being assured that it was—all the clerks in Locustville knew better than to show him anything but the least expensive—nodded.

"I'll take it," he said, and grudgingly reached for his hip pocket.

"Don't you think the material is kind of thin, Abner?" little Emily Hawks asked, a note of pleading in her voice. "Last winter Billy had colds all the time, and Ned—"

The man did not bother to answer. With the well-filled wallet in his left hand, he inserted thumb and forefinger and brought out a twenty-dollar bill.

"Here," he said. "And I've got thirteen dollars forty cents coming."

Taking the bill and starting to turn away, the clerk turned abruptly back. Luke Hawks had snatched the money from his hand.

"Is anything—" he began, and stopped. Testily the man was still holding out the note.

"Take it," he snapped. "Don't make me stand here waiting."

"Yes, sir." The clerk apologized, and took a firmer hold. But he could not take the bill from Luke Hawks. He pulled. Hawks' hand jerked forward. Scowling, the lean man drew his hand back. The money came with it.

"What's the matter, Luke?" Emily Hawks asked. Her husband favored her with a frown.

"Some glue on it, or something," he muttered. "It stuck to my fingers. I'll get another bill out, young man."

He put the twenty back into the wallet —where it went easily enough—and drew out two tens. But neither would these leave his hand.

Luke Hawks was beginning to go a little pale. He transferred the notes to his left hand. But though his left hand could take them from his right, the clerk could take them from neither. Whenever he tugged at it, the money simply would not come loose. It stuck as close to Luke Hawks' fingers as if it were part of his skin.

A red flush crept into the man's cheeks. He could not meet his wife's gaze.

"I—I dunno—" he muttered. "I'll lay it down. You pick it up."

Carefully he laid a ten dollar bill on the counter, spread his fingers wide, and lifted his hand. To his horror and fright, the bit of green paper came with it, adhering firmly to his finger tips.

"Luke Hawks," his wife said sturdily, "it's a judgment on you. The good Lord has put a curse on your money."

"Hush!" Hawks warned. "Netty Peters has come in the store and is looking. She'll

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hear you and go gabbing nonsense all—"

"It is not nonsense!" his wife stated. "It's truth. Your money will not leave your fingers."

LUKE HAWKS went deathly pale again. With a strangled curse, he snatched out all the money in his wallet and tried to throw it down on the counter. To his intense relief, one folded green slip fluttered down, though the rest remained in his hand.

"There!" he gasped. "It ain't so! Boy, how much is that?"

The clerk reached for the paper.

"It—it's a cigar coupon, sir," he reported, his face wooden.

Luke Hawks wilted then. He thrust all his money into the ancient pigskin wallet and being careful his fingers touched only the leather, held it out to his wife.

"Here!" he directed. "You pay him, Emily."

Emily Hawks folded her arms and looked straight into his frightened eyes.

"Luke Hawks," she said, in a firm, clear voice that carried through the entire store, "for eight years my life has been made a misery by your mean, grasping ways. Now you can't spend any of your money. You'll starve to death before you can even spend a nickel for bread.

"And I've a good mind to let you. If I don't buy anything for you, you can be sure no one will give it to you. The people of this town would laugh themselves sick seeing you with your hands full of money, begging for a bite to eat. They wouldn't give it to you, either."

Luke Hawks knew they wouldn't. He stared down at his wife, who had never before dared act like this.

"No," he protested. "Emily, don't say that. Here, you take the money. Spend it as you want. Get the things we need. I'll leave it all to you. You—you can even get the next most expensive clothes for the boys."

"You mean you want me to handle the money from now on?" Emily Hawks demanded, and her husband nodded.

"Yes, Emily," he gasped. "Take it. Please take it."

His wife took the wallet—which left Luke Hawks' hands readily enough—and counted the money in it.

"Five hundred dollars," she said aloud, thoughtfully. "Luke, hadn't you better give me a check for what you've got in the bank? If I'm to do all the buying, the money'll have to be in my hands."

"A check!" Luke exclaimed. "That's it! I don't need money! I'll pay by check."

"Try it," Emily invited. "That's the same as cash, isn't it?"

Luke tried it. The check would not leave his fingers either. It only tore to pieces when the clerk tugged at it.

After that, he capitulated. He took out his book and signed a blank check, which Emily was able to take. She then filled it in for herself for the entire balance in the bank—twenty thousand dollars, Luke Hawks admitted with strangled reluctance.

After that she tucked the check into the bosom of her dress.

"Now, Abner," she suggested, "you might as well go on home. I'll go to the bank and deposit this to my account. Then I'll do the rest of the shopping. I won't need you."

"But how'll you get the things home?" her husband asked weakly.

Emily Hawks was already almost to the door—out which Netty Peters had just dashed to spread the news through the town. But she paused long enough to turn and smile brightly at her pale and perspiring husband.

"I'll have the man at the garage drive me out with them," she answered. "In the car I'm going to buy after I leave the bank, Abner."

IV

MISS WILSON looked up from her sewing at the sound of galloping hooves in the street outside her tiny shop.

She was just in time to see a small swift figure race by. Then, before she could won-

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der what it was, she caught sight of herself in the big mirror customers used when trying on the dresses she made.

Her whole name was Alice Wilson. But it was years since anyone had called her by her first name. She was thirty-three, as small and plain as a church mouse—

But she wasn't! Miss Wilson stared open-mouthed at her reflection. She—she wasn't mouse-like any longer. She was—yes, really—almost pretty!

A length of dress goods forgotten in one hand, a needle suspended in mid-air in the other, Alice Wilson stared at the woman in the glass. A small woman, with a smiling, pink and white face, over which a stray lock of golden hair had fallen from the piled-up mass of curls on the top of her head—curls that gave out a soft and shining light.

The woman in the mirror had soft, warm red lips and blue eyes of sky-azure clearness and depth. Alice Wilson stared, and smiled in sheer delight. The image smiled back.

Wonderingly, Alice touched her face with her fingers. What had happened? What kind of a trick were her eyes playing on her? How—

The clatter of hurrying footsteps made her jump. Netty Peters, her sharp face alight with excitement, her head thrust forward on her skinny neck like a running chicken's, ran in. Miss Wilson's dressmaking shop, the closest place to the Fair-Square store, was her first stop on her tour to spread the news of Luke Hawk's curse.

"Miss Wilson," she gobbled breathlessly, "what do you think—"

"She thinks you've come to spread some scandal or other, that's what she thinks," a shrill, file-like voice interrupted.

The voice seemed to come from her own mouth. Netty Peters glared.

"Miss Wilson," she snapped, "if you think ventriloquism is funny when I'm trying to tell you—*just like you're going to tell everybody else!"* the second voice broke in, and Netty Peters felt faint. The words *had* come from her own mouth!

She put her hands to her throat; and because her mind was blank with fright, her tongue went busily ahead with what she had planned to say.

"I saw Luke Hawks—*just like you see everything"*—that was the shrill, second voice, alternating with her own normal one—"in the Fair-Square store and they—*were minding their own business, something you might do*—they were buying clothes for their poor starved children whom they treat so shamefully—*trust you to get that in!*—when Mr. Hawks tried to pay the clerk—*and you were watching to see how much they spent*—the money wouldn't leave his fingers—*did you ever think how many people would be happy if sometimes the words wouldn't leave your throat?"*

The town gossip ceased. Her words had become all jumbled together, making no sense, like two voices trying to shout each other down. There was a strange fluttering in her throat. As if she were talking with two tongues at the same time. . . .

Miss Wilson was staring at her strangely, and Netty Peters saw for the first time the odd radiance in Miss Wilson's hair, the new sweetness in her features.

Incoherent words gurgled in the older woman's throat. Terror glazed her eyes. She turned, and with a queer sobbing wail, fled.

ALICE WILSON was still looking after her in bewilderment when another figure momentarily darkened the doorway. It was Mr. Wiggins, who owned the unprofitable bookstore on the other side of her dressmaking establishment.

Ordinarily Mr. Wiggins was a shy, pale-faced man, his thirty-eight years showing in the stoop of his shoulders, his eyes squinting behind thick glasses. He often smiled, but it was the small, hopeful smile of a man who didn't dare not to smile for fear he might lose heart altogether.

But today, this day of strange happenings, Mr. Wiggins was standing erect. His hair was rumpled, his glasses awry, and his eyes blazing with excitement.

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"Miss Wilson!" he cried. "The most amazing thing has happened! I had to tell somebody. I hope you don't mind my bursting in to tell you."

Alice Wilson stared at him, and instantly forgot about the strange thing that had happened to her to be interested in Mr. Wiggin's experience.

"Oh, *no!*" she answered. "Of course I don't. I—I'm glad!"

Outside there were more sounds of galloping hooves, shrill squeals, and men's voices shouting.

"There seems to be a herd of wild ponies loose in the town," Mr. Wiggins told Miss Wilson. "One almost knocked me down, racing along the sidewalk as I was coming here. Miss Wilson, you'll never believe it, what I was going to tell you. You'll have to see for yourself. Then you won't think I'm mad."

"Oh, I'd never think that!" Miss Wilson assured him.

Scarcely hearing her, Mr. Wiggins seized her by the hand and almost dragged her to the door. A flush of warm pleasure rose into Miss Wilson's cheeks at the touch of his hand.

A little breathless, she ran beside him, out the shop door, down a dozen yards, and into the gloom of his tiny, unpatronized bookstore.

On the way, she barely had a glimpse of three or four shaggy ponies snorting and wheeling further up the street, with Henry Jones and Jake Harrison, assisted by a crowd of laughing men and boys, trying to catch them.

Then Mr. Wiggins, trembling with excitement, was pushing her down into an old overstuffed chair.

"Miss Wilson," he said tensely, "I was sitting right here when in came Jacob Earl, not fifteen minutes ago. You know how he walks—big and pompous, as if he owned the earth. I knew what he wanted. He wanted the thousand dollars I owe him, that I borrowed to buy my stock of books with. And I—I didn't have it. None of it.

"You remember when my aunt died last year, she left me that property down by the river that I sold to Jacob Earl for five hundred dollars? He pretended he was just doing me a favor buying it, to help me get started in business.

"But then high grade gravel was discovered on the land, and now it's worth at least fifteen thousand dollars. I learned Earl knew about the gravel all the time. But in spite of that, he wanted the thousand he loaned me."

"Yes, oh yes!" Miss Wilson exclaimed. "He would. But what did you *do,* Mr. Wiggins?"

Mr. Wiggins combed back his disheveled hair with his fingers.

"I told him I didn't have it. And he took off his glove—his right glove—and told me if I didn't have it by tomorrow, he'd have to attach all my books and fixtures. And then he put his hand down on top of my little brass Chinese luck piece. And guess what happened?"

"Oh, I couldn't!" Miss Wilson whispered. "I never could!"

"Look!" Mr. Wiggins' voice trembled. He snatched up a large dust cloth that hid something on the counter just before Miss Wilson's eyes. Underneath the cloth was a squat little Chinese god, about a foot high, sitting with knees crossed and holding a bowl in his lap.

On his brass countenance was a sly smile, and his mouth was open in a round O of great amusement.

And as Miss Wilson stared at him, a small gold coin popped out of the little god's mouth and landed with a musical chink in the bowl in his lap!

ALICE WILSON gasped. "Oh, John!" she cried, using Mr. Wiggins' Christian name for the first time in her life. "Is it—is it money?"

"Chinese money," Mr. Wiggins told her. "And the bowl is full of it. It's filled just since I ran over to get you. One comes out of his mouth every second. The first one came out right after Mr. Pearl put his hand on the god's head. Look!"

He scooped up the contents of the bowl and held them out, let them rain into Miss

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Wilson's lap. Incredulously she picked one up.

It was a coin as large perhaps as an American nickel. In the center was punched a square hole. All around the edges were queer Oriental ideographs. And the piece of money was as fresh and new and shiny as if it had just come from the mint.

"Is it real gold?" she asked tremulously.

"Twenty carats pure at least!" John Wiggins assured her. "Even if it is Chinese money, the coins must be worth five dollars apiece just for the metal. And look—the bowl is half full again."

They stared wide-eyed and breathless at the little grinning god. Every second, as regularly as clockwork, another gold coin popped out of his open mouth.

"It's as if—as if he were coining them!" John Wiggins whispered.

"Oh, it's wonderful!" Alice Wilson told him, with rapture. "John, I'm so glad! For your sake. Now you can pay off Earl."

"In his own coin!" the man chortled. "Because he started it happening, you know, so you could call it his own coin. Perhaps he pressed a secret spring or something that released them from where they were hidden inside the god. I don't know.

"But the funny thing is, he couldn't pick them up! He tried to pretend he had just dropped the first couple, but they rolled out of the bowl and right across the floor when he reached for them. And then he began to get frightened. He grabbed up his hat and his glove and ran out."

Then John Wiggins paused. He was looking down at Alice Wilson, and for the first time he really saw the change that had occurred in her.

"Why—why—" he said, "do you know, your hair is the same color as the coins?"

"Oh, it isn't!' Miss Wilson protested, blushing scarlet at the first compliment a man had paid her in ten years.

"It is," he insisted. "And you—you're lovely, Alice. I never realized before how lovely. You're as pretty as—as pretty as a picture!"

He looked down into her eyes, and without taking his gaze away, reached down and took her hands in his. He drew her up out of the chair, and still crimsoning with pleasure, Alice Wilson stood and faced him.

"Alice," John Wiggins said, "Alice, I've known you for a long time, and I've been blind. I guess worry blinded me. Or I'd have seen long ago how beautiful you are and known what I've just realized. I know I'm not much of a success as a man but—but Alice, would you be my wife?"

Alice Wilson gave a little sigh and rested her face against his shoulder so that he might not see the tears in her eyes. Happiness had mostly eluded her until now, but this moment more than made up for all the years that were past.

John Wiggins put his arms about her, and behind them the little god grinned and went busily on with his minting. . . .

JACOB EARL stamped into his library in his home and locked the door behind him, with fingers that shook a little.

Throwing his hat and stick down, with his gloves, onto a chair, he groped for a cigar in his desk and lit it, by sheer force of will striving to quell the inward agitation that was shaking him.

But— Well, any man might feel shaken if he had put his hand down on a cold brass paperweight and had felt the thing twist in his grip as if alive, had felt a shock in his fingers like a sudden discharge of electricity, and then had seen the thing start to spout gold money.

Money—and Jacob Earl gazed down at his soft, plump white hands almost with fright—which had *life* in it. Because when he had tried to pick it up, it had eluded him. It had *dodged.*

Angrily he flung away his barely smoked cigar. Hallucinations! He'd been having a dizzy spell, or—or something. Or Wiggins had fixed up a trick to play on him. That was it, a trick!

The nerve of the man, giving him such a start! When he had finished with the little rabbit he—he—

Jacob Earl did not quite formulate what he would do. But the mere thought

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of threatening somebody made him feel better. He'd decide later what retaliation he would make.

Right now, he'd get to work. He'd inventory his strong box. Nothing like handling hard, tangible possessions, like stocks and bonds and gold, to restore a man's nerves when he felt shaky.

He spun the combination of his safe, swung open the heavy outer door, unlocked the inner door, and slid out first a weighty steel cash box locked by a massive padlock.

Weighty, because it held the one thing a man couldn't have too much of—gold. Pure gold ingots, worth five hundred dollars each. Fifteen thousand dollars' worth of them.

He'd had them since long before the government called in gold. And he was going to keep them, government or no. If he ever had to sell them, he'd claim they'd been forgotten, and found again by accident.

Jacob Earl flung open the lid of his gold cache. And his overly ruddy face turned a sudden pallid gray. Two of the ingots in the top layer were missing!

But no one could get into his safe. No one but himself. It wasn't possible that a thief—

Then the gray turned to ashen white. His eyes started, his breath caught in his throat. As he stared, a third ingot had vanished. Evaporated. Into thin air. As if an unseen hand had closed over it and snatched it away.

But it wasn't possible! Such a thing couldn't happen.

And then the fourth ingot vanished. Transfixed by rage and fright, he put his hands down on the remaining yellow bars and pressed with all his might.

But presently the fifth of his precious chunks of metal slipped away from beneath his very fingers into nothingness. One instant it was there, and he could feel it. Then—gone!

With a hoarse cry, Jacob Earl dropped the cash box. He stumbled across the room to his telephone, got a number.

"Doctor?" he gasped. "Doctor Norcross? This is Jacob Earl. I—I—"

Then he bethought himself. This couldn't happen. This was madness. If he told anyone—

"Never mind, doctor!" he blurted. "Sorry to have troubled you. It's all right."

He hung up. And sat there, all the rest of the day, sweat beading his brow, watching the shiny yellow oblongs that had fallen on the floor vanish one by one.

*

In another part of town, another hand crept toward the telephone—and drew back. Minerva Benson's hand. Minerva Benson had discovered her deformity almost the instant she had arisen, late that morning. The stiff, lifeless face affixed to the back of her head now. Thin, vicious, twisted, the features of a harpy.

With trembling fingers she touched it again, in a wild hope that it might have vanished. Then she huddled closer on the end of the sofa in the darkened room, whose door was locked, blinds drawn.

She couldn't telephone. Because no one must see her like this. No one. Not even a doctor. . . .

*

And in her tiny, spinsterish home Netty Peters also crouched, and also feared to telephone.

Feared, lest that strange, dreadful second voice begin to clack and rattle in her throat when she tried to talk, tried to ask Doctor Norcross to come.

Crouched, and felt her throat with fingers like frantic claws. And was sure she could detect something moving in her throat like a thing alive.

V

MRS. EDWARD NORTON moved along the tree-shaded streets toward the downtown section of Locustville with all the self-conscious pride of a frigate entering a harbor under full sail.

She was a full-bodied woman—well

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built, she phrased it—and expensively dressed. Certainly the best-dressed woman in town, as befitted her position as leader of Locustville's social life and the most influential woman in town.

And today she was going to use her influence. She was going to have Janice Avery discharged as teacher in the high school.

Distinctly she had seen the young woman *smoking* in her room, the previous evening, as she happened to be driving by. A woman who should be an example to the children she taught actually—

Mrs. Norton sailed along, indignation high in her. She had called first at Minerva Benson's home. Minerva was a member of the school board. But Minerva had said she was sick, and refused to see her.

Then she had tried Jacob Earl, the second member of the board. And he had been ill too.

It was odd.

Now she was going directly to the office of Doctor Norcross. He was head of the school board. Not the kind of man she approved of for the position, of course—

Mrs. Norton paused. For the past few moments she had been experiencing a strange sensation of puffiness, of lightness. Was she ill too? Could she be feeling lightheaded or dizzy?

But no, she was perfectly normal. Just a moment's upset perhaps, from walking too fast.

She continued onward. What had she been thinking? Oh, yes, Doctor Norcross. An able physician, perhaps, but his wife was really quite—well, quite a dowdy. . . .

Mrs. Norton paused again. A gentle breeze was blowing down the street and she—she was being swayed from side to side by it. Actually, it was almost pushing her off balance!

She took hold of a convenient lamp post. That stopped her from swaying. But—

She stared transfixed at her fingers. They were swollen and puffy.

Her rings were cutting into them painfully. Could she have some awful—

Then she became aware of a strained, uncomfortable feeling all over her person. A feeling of being confined, intolerably pent-up in her clothing.

With her free hand she began to pat herself, at first with puzzlement, then with terror. Her clothing was as tight on her as the skin of a sausage. It had shrunk! It was cutting off her circulation!

No, it hadn't. That wasn't true. She was growing! Puffing up! Filling out her clothes like a slowly expanding balloon.

Her corset was confining her diaphragm, making it impossible to breathe. She couldn't get air into her lungs.

She had some awful disease. That was what came of living in a dreadful, dirty place like Locustville, among backward, ignorant people who carried germs and—

At that instant the laces of Mrs. Norton's corsets gave way. She could actually feel herself swell, bloat, puff out. Her arms were queer and hard to handle. The seams of her dress were giving way.

The playful breeze pushed her, and she swayed back and forth like a midnight drunk staggering homeward.

Her fingers slipped from the lamp post.

And she began to rise slowly, ponderously into the air, like a runaway balloon.

MRS. EDWARD NORTON screamed. Piercingly. But her voice seemed lost, a thin wail that carried hardly twenty yards. This was unthinkable. This was impossible!

But it was happening.

Now she was a dozen feet above the sidewalk. Now twenty. And at that level she paused, spinning slowly around and around, her arms flopping like a frightened chicken's wings, her mouth opening and closing like a feeding goldfish's, but no sounds coming forth.

If anyone should see her now! Oh, if anyone should see her!

But no one did. The street was quite deserted. The houses were few, and set well back from the street. And the excitement downtown, the herd of strange ponies that all day had been kicking up their heels as they dodged in and out of alleys,

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whinnying and squealing as Henry Jones and his volunteer assistants tried to pen them up, had drawn every unoccupied soul in Locustville.

Mrs. Norton, pushed along by the gentle breeze, began to drift slowly northward toward the town limits.

Tree branches scraped her and ripped her stockings as she clutched unavailingly at them. A crow, attracted by the strange spectacle, circled around her several times, emitted a raucous squawk that might have been amusement, and flew off.

A stray dog, scratching fleas in the sunshine, saw her pass overhead and followed along underneath for a moment, barking furiously.

Mrs. Norton crimsoned with shame and mortification. Oh, if anyone saw her!

But if no one saw her, no one could help her. She did not know whether to pray for someone to come along or not. She was unhurt. Perhaps nothing worse was going to happen.

But to be sailing placidly through the air, twenty feet above the street, puffed up like a balloon!

The breeze had brought her out to a district marked for subdivision, but still vacant. Fruit trees grew upon the land. The playful wind, shifting its quarter, altered her course. In a moment she was drifting past the upper branches of gnarled old apple trees, quite hidden from the street.

Her clothes were torn, her legs and arms scratched, her hair straggling down her back. And her indignation and fear of being seen began to give way to a sensation of awful helplessness. She, the most important woman in Locustville, to be blowing around among a lot of old fruit trees for crows to caw at and dogs to bark at and—

Mrs. Norton gasped. She had just risen another three feet.

With that she began to weep.

The tears streamed down her face. All at once she felt humble and helpless and without a thought for her dignity or her position. She just wanted to get down.

She just wanted to go home and have Edward pat her shoulder and say, "There, there," as he used to—a long time ago—while she had a good cry on his shoulder.

She was a bad woman, and being punished for it. She had been puffed up with pride, and this was what came of it. In the future, if ever she got down safely, she'd know better.

As if influenced by the remorseful thoughts, she began to descend slowly. Before she was aware of it, she had settled into the upper branches of a cherry tree, scaring away a flock of indignant robins.

And there she caught.

She had quite a lot of time in which to reflect before she saw Janice Avery swinging past along a short cut from the school to her home, and called to her.

JANICE AVERY got her down. With the aid of Bill Morrow, who was the first person she could find when she ran back to the school to get aid.

Bill was just getting into his car to drive out to the football field, where he was putting the school team through spring practice, when she ran up; and at first he did not seem to understand what she was saying.

As a matter of fact, he didn't. He was just hearing her voice—a voice that was cool and sweet and lovely, like music against a background of distant silver bells.

Then, when he got it, he sprang into action.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "Mrs. Norton stuck up a tree picking cherries? I can't believe it."

But he got a ladder from the school and brought it, gulping at the sight of the stout, tearful woman caught in the crotch of the cherry tree.

A few moments later they had her down. Mrs. Norton made no effort to explain beyond the simple statement she had first made to Janice.

"I was picking cherries and I just got stuck."

Wild as it was, it was better than the truth.

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Bill Morrow brought his car as close as he could and Janice hurried her out to it, torn, scratched, bedraggled, red-eyed. They got her in without anyone seeing and drove her home.

Mrs. Norton sobbed out a choked thanks and fled into the house, to weep on the shoulders of her surprised husband.

Bill Morrow mopped his forehead and looked at Janice Avery. She wasn't pretty, but— Well, there was something in her face. Something swell. And her voice. A man could hear a voice like that all his life and not grow tired of it.

"Lord!" he exclaimed, as he slid behind the wheel of his car. "And Betty Norton is going to look just like that some day. Whew! Do you know, I'm a fool. I actually once thought of— But never mind. Where can I take you?"

He grinned at her, and Janice Avery smiled back, little happy lines springing into life around the corners of her lips and her eyes.

"Well," she began, as the wide-shouldered young man kicked the motor into life, "you have to get to practice—"

"Practice is out!" Bill Morrow told her with great firmness, and let in the clutch. "We're going some place and talk!"

She sat back, content.

VI

THE sun was setting redly as Dr. Norcross closed his office and swung off homeward with a lithe step.

It had been a strange day. Darned strange. Wild ponies had been running through the town since morning, madly chased by the usually somnolent Henry Jones. From his window he had seen into the bookstore across the street and distinctly perceived John Wiggins and Alice Wilson embracing.

Then there had been that abortive phone call from an obviously agitated Jacob Earl. And he had positively seen Mrs. Luke Hawks going past in a brand new car, with a young man at the wheel who seemed to be teaching her to drive. Whew!

There would be a lot to tell his wife tonight.

His reflections were cut short as he strode past Henry Jones' backyard, which lay on his homeward short-cut route.

A crowd of townsfolk were gathered about the door in the fence around the yard, and Dr. Norcross could observe others in the house, peering out the windows.

Henry and Jake Harrison, mopping their faces with fatigue, stood outside peering into the yard through the cautiously opened doorway. And over the fence itself, he was able to see the tossing heads of many ponies, while their squeals cut the evening air.

"Well, Henry"—that was Martha, who came around the corner of the house and pushed through the crowd about her husband—"you've rounded up all the horses all right. But how're you going to pay for the damage they did today? Now you'll have to go to work, in spite of yourself. Even if they aren't good for anything else they've accomplished *that!*"

There was an excitement on Henry's face Dr. Norcross had never seen there before.

"Sure, Martha, sure," he agreed. "I know I'll have to pay off the damage. But Jake and me, we've got plans for these hooved jackrabbits. Know what we're going to do?"

He turned, so all of the gathered crowd could hear his announcement.

"Jake and me, we're going to use that land of Jake's south of town to breed polo ponies!" he declared. "Yes, sir, we're going to cross these streaks of lightning with real polo ponies. We're gonna get a new breed with the speed of a whippet, the endurance of a mule, and the intelligence of a human.

"Anybody who seen these creatures skedaddle around town today knows that when we get a polo pony with their blood in it developed, it'll be something! Yes, sir, something! I wish—

"No I don't! I don't wish anything! Not a single, solitary thing! I'm not gonna wish for anything ever again, either!"

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Norcross grinned. Maybe Henry had something there.

Then, noting that the sun had just vanished, he was home.

UP IN his room, Danny Norcross woke groggily from a slumber that had been full of dreams. Half asleep still, he groped for and found the little piece of ivory he had kept beside him ever since he had fallen asleep the night before.

His brow wrinkled. He had been on the stair, listening to the grown-ups talk. They had said a lot of queer things. About horses, and money, and pictures. Then he had gotten back in bed. And played with his bit of ivory for awhile.

Then he had had a funny thought, and sort of a wish—

The wish that had passed through his mind, as he had been falling asleep, had been that all the things Dad and Mom and the others had said would come true, because it would be so funny if they did.

So he had wished that just for one day, maybe, all Henry Jones' wishes would be horses, and money would stick to Luke Hawks' fingers, and Jacob Earl would touch something that would coin money for somebody else for a change.

And, too, that Netty Peters' tongue really would be hinged in the middle and wag at both ends, and Mrs. Benson have two faces, and Mrs. Norton swell up and blow around like a balloon.

And that Miss Wilson would really be as pretty as a picture, and you could truly hear silver bells when Miss Avery talked.

That had been his wish. But now, wide awake and staring out the window at a sky all red because the sun had set, he couldn't quite remember it, try as he would. . . .

*

Crouched in her darkened room, Minerva Benson felt the back of her head for the hundredth time. First with shuddering horror, then with hope, then with incredulous relief. The dreadful face was gone now.

But she would remember it, and be haunted by it forever in her dreams.

*

Netty Peters stared at herself in her mirror, her eyes wide and frightened. Slowly she took her hands from her throat. The queer fluttering was gone. She could talk again without that terrible voice interrupting.

But always after, when she began to speak, she would stop abruptly for fear it might sound again, in the middle of a sentence.

*

"I've decided, Luke," Mrs. Luke Hawks said with decision, "that we'll have the house painted and put in a new furnace. Then I'm going to take the children off on a little vacation.

"No, don't say anything! Remember, the money is in my name now, and I can spend it all, if I've a mind to. I can take it and go away to California, or any place.

"And no matter what you say or do, I'm not going to give it back!"

*

Jacob Earl uttered a groan. The last gold ingot had just vanished from the floor of his library.

*

John Wiggins turned. The tiny *chink-chink* that had sounded all afternoon had ceased. The little god still grinned, but the coins were no longer coming from his mouth.

"He's quit," the little man announced to the flushed and radiant Alice Wilson. "But we don't care. Look how much money came out of him. Why there must be fifteen thousand dollars there!

"Alice, we'll take a trip around the world. And we'll take him back to China, where he came from. He deserves a reward."

*

With the red afterglow tinting the little

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lake beside which he had parked the car, Bill Morrow turned. His arm was already about Janice Avery's shoulders.

So it really wasn't any effort for him to draw her closer and kiss her, firmly, masterfully.

THE door to Danny's room opened. He heard Dad and Mom come in, and pretended for a minute that he was asleep.

"He's been napping all day," Mom was saying. "He hardly woke up enough to eat breakfast. I guess he must have lain awake late last night. But his fever was down, and he didn't seem restless, so I didn't call you."

"We'll see how he is now," Dad's voice answered; and Danny, who had closed his eyes to try to remember better, opened them again.

Dad was bending over his bed.

"How do you feel, son?" he asked.

"I feel swell," Danny told him, and struggled to a sitting position. "Look what I found yesterday in my box. What is it, Dad?"

Doctor Norcross took the piece of ivory Danny held out, and looked at it.

"I'll be darned!" he exclaimed to his wife. "Danny's found the old Chinese talisman Grandfather Jonas brought back on the last voyage of the *Yankee Star*. He gave it to me thirty years ago. Told me it had belonged to a Chinese magician.

"It's peculiar power, he said, was that if you held it tight, you could have one wish come true, providing—as the Chinese inscription on the bottom says—your mind was pure, your spirit innocent, and your motive unselfish.

"I wished on it dozens of times, but nothing ever happened. Guess it was because I was too materialistic and wished for bicycles and things.

"Here, Danny, you can keep it. But take good care of it. It's very old; even the man who gave it to Grandfather Jonas didn't know how old it was."

Danny took back the talisman.

"I made a wish, Dad," he confessed.

"So?" Dad grinned. "Did it come true?"

"I don't know," Danny admitted. "I can't remember what it was."

Dad chuckled.

"Then I guess it didn't come true," he remarked. "Never mind; you can make another. And if that one doesn't happen either, don't fret. You can keep the talisman and tell people the story. It's a good story, even if it isn't so."

Probably it wasn't so. It was certain that the next time Danny wished, nothing happened. Nor any of the times after that. So that by and by he gave up trying.

He was always a little sorry, though, that he never could remember that first wish, made when he was almost asleep.

But he never could. Not even later, when he heard people remarking how much marriage had improved Alice Wilson's appearance and how silvery Mrs. Bob Morrow's voice was.

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Dead of Night

Start now this exciting mystery novel featuring Hyer and Quick—and headed for the best-seller lists

By KURT STEEL

THE stars in their courses, circling the Manhattan heavens, must have looked down apprehensively at the affairs of the Thayer family. For, since two of the Thayers took such an interest in the stars, it may be supposed that the stars returned the compliment.

Both NAT THAYER, the wealthy publisher, and BERYL, his addle-pated second wife, are ardent believers in astrology, particularly of the sort expensively peddled by the fashionable faker, CLEARSE OWEN. MARCIA, Nat's daughter by his first marriage, watched her father's growing fanaticism on the subject with a good deal of alarm. First, because she both distrusts and fears Owen. Second, because Owen's advice is threatening to play havoc with her marriage to RICHARD LANNING, Beryl's winning and irresponsible nephew.

Richard, newly fired from his position with Thayer's publication firm, demands that Nat Thayer release to him the money left him by his mother. Thayer, the trustee of the estate, is determined to ask the opinion of the stars—and Clearse Owen—on the subject. Richard is determined that he shall not.

Marcia sends Richard to the Thayer camp on Lake Manitou to cool off, while she tries to manage her father; and is alarmed when Thayer announces his decision to take Owen up to the camp for the momentous conference.

BERYL THAYER, in one of her mercurial shifts, is suddenly convinced that Owen is a charlatan and tries to persuade HANK HYER, the detective, to break Owen's hold over her husband. PIERRE DAWSON, Thayer's partner, is also eager for Hyer to

This story began in last week's Argosy

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take the case. But Hyer feels that the proposition is too vague and a little too suggestive of blackmail for him to touch.

A week later, Marcia Thayer comes to his apartment, with something a good deal more tangible to lay before Hyer. Her father has disappeared.

The facts are these: Thayer and Owen had arrived at the camp on Monday afternoon. Immediately Owen had engaged in an altercation with KARL SANDLUND, the caretaker, over the key to Owen's laboratory at the camp, which was missing; Owen had persuaded Thayer to fire the man.

They had left the camp the following day, and missed an appointment with Dawson in Albany. He has not been seen since, although no announcement of the disappearance had been made.

As to Rich Lanning—he had not gone to the camp on Monday, luckily; he had arrived on Tuesday morning and has been there ever since, his whereabouts known only to Marcia and to AUGUSTA WARREN, the housekeeper.

As Marcia finishes her recital, the phone rings. The call is for her and she listens to it, shaken. When she hangs up, she turns to Hyer.

"I don't want you to do anything on this case," she says. "Not yet, anyway. Something has happened that changes everything—and I've got to have time to think things over."

Under Hyer's gentle urging, she admits the truth. "They've arrested Richard Lanning!" she blurts out. . . .

CHAPTER VII

NOONTIME MISTS

"SO," HYER said, "the police are on the job, are they? Well, you and I can—"

"Oh no," Marcia said quickly, "I'd much rather you forgot all about it, Mr. Hyer. That is—now, at least."

"Five thousand dollars takes a lot of forgetting."

Marcia flushed. "Surely you don't intend to hold me to that, Mr. Hyer."

"Why not? What's changed in the last three minutes? Your father is still missing, so far as we know. Rich Lanning still had a row with him about twelve hours before he disappeared. You've had news that Lanning's locked up. That's all.

"Isn't that enough?" Then, with a flash of spirit, she said, "You needn't be quite so brutal about it, need you?"

"No," Hyer said, "I suppose not." He eyed her and she returned his gaze levelly. "Your father disliked Lanning, didn't he?"

"That's not true. He thought Rich irresponsible. And *that's* not true, either." She caught herself. "I'll be running along now, Mr. Hyer."

Hyer grinned. "It wasn't an airtight contract, but I don't think either of us is going to court over it."

She stared at him, and the anger in her blue eyes quieted. The corner of her mouth dropped. "Perhaps Beryl was right about you, after all." When Hyer looked startled, Marcia said, "Beryl tried numerology on your name before you came up last Monday morning. You turned out to be a Seven."

Hyer looked pleased. "I've known worse."

She put out her hand. "Can you forget I was a little fool?"

"That depends on how often I'm reminded of it."

Marcia telephoned home and prepared her stepmother for their visit; then she called Pierre Dawson and asked him to meet them at the Thayer apartment.

WHEN Beryl Hawtrey Harnett Thayer greeted Hyer as he walked into the drawing room overlooking the East River, it was as if a fine film of vigilance clouded her eagerness. "Oh, Mr. Hyer, how *do* you do. Marcia telephoned me she was bringing you up." She turned to Marcia. "I think our situation scarcely calls for such grim measures, dear."

"You thought so last Monday," Marcia retorted.

"Oh," Beryl said quickly, "*that* was different."

Pierre Dawson said, "Hello, Hyer," and shook hands with the detective. "What's happened, Marcia?"

"They've arrested Rich."

"*Rich?*" Beryl screamed. Her eyes wide, she backed a step and dropped into a chair.

Dawson said, "Rich?" in consternation. "My God! Why?"

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"I don't know."

"It might be a good idea to call up and find out," Hyer suggested.

"Marcia darling," Beryl said quickly. "Run get the phone from the library and plug it in here where we can all—I mean, where it will be more convenient for Mr. Hyer."

"We could split up," Marcia said, "and listen on separate extensions."

Beryl flushed. "You *know* I didn't mean that."

Marcia brought the telephone, said, "Maybe you'd better make the call, Mr. Hyer," plugged it in and handed it to him.

Hyer took the phone, asked for the State Police at Manitou Lake.

Beryl's hand flew to her mouth. She quavered, "The—*State* Police," and let herself weakly to a chair.

Hyer put through his call and had talked but a moment when he raised his eyebrows, said, "He's right here now. Want to talk to him?" He covered the transmitter, said to Dawson, "Was your car stolen about a week ago?"

"Yes. Monday night."

"They've found it for you. Up at Manitou Lake. Here." He held out the phone.

"Pierre," Beryl whispered as Dawson talked, "what is it? What are they saying?"

Hyer looked at Marcia. He said, "According to the police, things point at Rich Lanning."

Beryl gasped. "But that's absurd! Why would Rich steal Pierre's car? Couldn't he have asked Pierre for it? Pierre," to Dawson, who had just hung up, "*why* would Rich steal you car, when he knew perfectly *well* that all he had to do was *ask* you for it?

"What did they say, Pierre? What's all this about your car? It wasn't really stolen, was it?" She turned to her stepdaughter. "Marcia, you didn't tell me a word about Pierre's car. It was such a lovely car, too. New," she said to Hyer. "I don't think Pierre had driven it more than —Pierre, how far had you driven it?"

"Rich was with me Monday night," Dawson said reluctantly, "at my house in Forest Hills. He was there when I called the garage and asked them to pick the car up in front of the house and give it a wash. I told them the key was in the glove compartment. I'd done that many times."

Hyer said, "Well?"

"Tuesday afternoon I was to meet Nat in Albany. I had a lot of things to do, so I left home earlier than usual Tuesday morning. When the car wasn't in front of the house, I just supposed they were late returning it from the garage and walked to the subway. Well—the garage didn't have it."

"Why not?" Beryl put in tensely. "*Why* didn't they have it, Pierre?"

"That," Dawson said slowly to Hyer, "is the disturbing part. Someone had called them about nine-thirty the night before and countermanded my wash-order. The garage thought it was I."

There was a moment of silence and then Beryl said, "Oh dear, *I* never can recognize voices over the phone, either."

"What time did Lanning leave you Monday night?" Hyer asked.

Dawson said, "Twenty minutes past nine. He was planning to go up to Manitou by the eleven o'clock train." He thought a moment. "When I got back from Albany Tuesday night and found the car had been stolen, I reported it. All those details were part of the report, of course, and—"

"Including the fact that Rich Lanning had been with you when you phoned the garage?"

Dawson looked blank. "No. *No!* By Jove, how could they—?"

"I guess that's my fault," Marcia broke in. As they looked at her, she bit her lip. "I told a State trooper at Manitou Lake about Rich's having been with Pierre when Dad telephoned Pierre from the Camp Monday night. I told him that to prove Dad had been at the Camp at nine-fifteen."

Hyer lifted an eyebrow. "I thought you said you'd been keeping this disappearance under your hats."

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Beryl said, *"Marcia!"* reproachfully.

"That's all right. I'd only told this one State Trooper. His name's MacKinnon and he's a right guy. I told him he wasn't to make it official until I said so."

Hyer looked at Beryl. "Miss Thayer tells me there are a couple of Owen's bookkeepers or something in the observatory all the time."

Beryl's lips tightened. "There are. They pretend," she went on acidly, "to be busy with—with telescopes and things. But if you ask me, they're just a couple of four-flushers."

"And Owen and Mr. Thayer had a chauffeur with them?"

Marcia said, "Eller. Owen usually flies up, but Dad doesn't like flying."

Hyer said, "Flies up? Pretty flossy astrologer."

"Wait till you've seen him."

HYER asked Dawson if Thayer had proposed the meeting in Albany when he called Dawson Monday night. When the detective seemed not wholly convinced by Dawson's affirmative, Beryl broke in quickly.

"Oh yes, it was Nat. I overheard—" She stopped.

"You heard him?" Hyer asked. "I thought he was locked in the observatory."

"There are two phones in the observatory," Marcia explained. "One of them is an extension from the Lodge."

Beryl flushed. "I wouldn't have you think I was listening in, Mr. Hyer. I wouldn't have you think that for the world. I had just picked up the phone to make a call, and—well, I heard Nat talking to Pierre. I heard him ask Pierre to meet him in Albany the next afternoon."

"And he didn't?" Hyer asked Dawson.

"No. I was waiting when his train came in. I looked high and low for him. I even had him paged. I don't see how he could have slipped by me."

"Of course," Beryl said, "Nat wasn't a very *large* man, Mr. Hyer."

Dawson frowned. "There's another thing, and this has had me really puzzled. I came on back to the city on Nat's train. I thought maybe he had forgotten, was asleep in a compartment or something. Well, when the train got to Grand Central about five-thirty, there was a chap waiting there with a summons to serve on Nat. Clerk in a firm that's got a suit against him. I ran into one of the partners the next day and he told me."

Hyer said, "That's interesting. What made them think Mr. Thayer would be on the train?"

"Why, somebody had phoned from somewhere upstate and tipped them off that Nat would be on it."

"Oh," said Hank. "Well, that's that." He thought: "Or is it?"

CHAPTER VIII

THE EYES OF NIGHT

AS MARCIA, Hyer, and Dawson waited for the elevator, it was agreed that they would go up to Manitou Lake early the next morning, Hyer suggesting delicately that it might be as well not to confide this plan to Beryl. "She's upset," the detective added. "No use tiring her out with a long hard drive."

Marcia laughed. "Don't let Beryl fool you. She's got buckskin nerves under all that fluff."

The apartment door opened and Beryl said, "Oh, Marcia, darling. Please. I must speak to you. Forgive us, won't you?" to Hyer and Dawson. "Oh, there's Miller with the elevator. It *would* be stuffy waiting here, wouldn't it? Marcia will join you—downstairs."

Dawson was silent as he and Hyer rode down. Then, when they had left the house and were crossing the street to his car, he said, "Last Thursday morning I cashed two checks for Nat."

Hyer said, "Thursday? He disappeared Monday night?"

Dawson nodded grimly. "I hadn't heard about it then. All I knew was that he hadn't met me in Albany Tuesday afternoon. I was in New Haven all day Wed-

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nesday, so I didn't have a chance to talk to Marcia or Beryl.

"Thursday morning Nat called me at home about seven-thirty. I asked him why he hadn't met me in Albany and he said something had come up to change his plans just after he had talked to me Monday night. He said he was in New York but that he was leaving immediately for Washington and wanted me to cash two checks for him and send the money—in currency—to him in Washington. General delivery."

Hyer said, "Oh."

"Yes, damn it," Dawson went on furiously. "I was a fool to fall for it, but it sounded like him all right, and when the checks arrived special delivery they looked perfectly regular."

"Big checks?"

Dawson looked at the detective and his mouth twisted. "They totaled over two hundred thousand dollars," he said slowly. He made a helpless gesture. "After all, it wasn't the firm's money. I don't believe in butting into private affairs."

"That was his own money, was it?"

"Whose else?" Dawson asked sharply.

"From what I hear, it could have belonged to Rich Lanning."

"Nonsense. Nat was too honest to have money he was trustee for not drawing interest."

AFTER a moment, Hyer said, "Have any idea why he'd be going to Washington?"

"Yes. He'd been interested in a manuscript some chap in one of the South American consulates has."

"On astrology?" Hyer asked naïvely. At the other's headshake, he squinted. "Has this Owen—his astrologer—been advising him to publish it?"

"If that was a guess, it was a damned good one. Yes, Owen has been pushing this idea for about three weeks. He'd made a lot of it the Saturday before at lunch, done his best to persuade Nat or me to go down to Washington and see this chap. I asked Nat Thursday morning if that was why he was going and he said it was one of the reasons."

"And somebody got the money in Washington Thursday afternoon?"

"Yes, damn it. I called up Beryl just after lunch—"

"She hadn't tried to get you?"

"Oh yes. That is, she said she'd called me several times Wednesday. When I talked to her, she told me what had happened at the Camp. I took the next plane to Washington, went straight to the General Post Office—and was about thirty minutes too late. I'd sent the currency first class and registered. In a book-mailing box.

"It had been picked up about half an hour before I got to the window. There was the receipt.

"Yes, I had the signature checked. I'd taken some samples with me, and I got hold of experts right away. Chap I know in the Treasury Department, and a couple of others in the Post Office. They all agreed it would be impossible to prove it a forgery."

"Did anybody in Washington see Thayer?"

"No one I talked to, at least."

"Did you have the signatures on the checks examined, too?"

"First thing when I got back. They're also apparently genuine—or damned clever forgeries." As he saw Marcia coming, Dawson said quickly, "Don't say anything about this to Marcia just yet. I thought I'd better tell you. Well," to Marcia, "you do look worn out."

"Beryl wanted to know why I'd gone to Mr. Hyer. I pointed out she had set me a bad example last week. We both ended up a little fuzzy."

Hyer (whose day normally began at noon) agreed, after some haggling, to be ready to start for the Adirondacks the following morning at six o'clock.

"If we start at six," Marcia said, "we'll have time to get Rich and go on to the Camp—if he hasn't been released before," quickly, defensively.

"I'll get to work on that," Dawson prom-

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ised. "The Queens District Attorney's a friend of mine."

WHEN Dawson had left them, and Marcia was driving Hyer down town, the detective said casually, "Has Rich Lanning been up at Manitou Lake the whole time?"

"Has he been—? Why, yes. Oh yes."

Hyer said, "I just wondered. He wasn't in Washington last Thursday, then?"

Marcia turned to him, startled. She said, "That's uncanny."

"He was in Washington?"

Her surprise under control now, she hesitated, bit her lip. "Yes. I had a note this morning from a girl I know in Chevy Chase. She said she saw Rich in Washington last Thursday. He didn't see her. I haven't had a chance to talk to him about it." She frowned. "How did *you* know?"

Instead of answering, Hyer said, "Last Thursday morning Dawson cashed two checks for your father."

She guided her car to the curb, stopped. When she faced him again, she was white. "Were they large checks?" she asked hoarsely.

"About two hundred thousand."

It was as if a light died in her eyes. She whispered something, her lips rigid.

Hyer said, "What?"

She looked away, touched her lips with her tongue. "I can't be sure, of course, but —well, Dad had liquidated most of Rich's assets only a few days before."

"On—?"

"Yes. On Owen's advice." Color burned in her face. "We will go and have a talk with Clearse Owen."

On the twentieth floor of an apartment house on Central Park West, a simple Gothic door was opened to their ring by a plump maid with matched dimples and sharp distrustful black eyes. Had they an appointment with Mr. Owen? Mr. Owen could see no one except on appointment.

"But is he here?" Marcia demanded.

"Have you an appointment?"

Hyer said, "I think so."

The stiletto glance dropped for an instant to the bill in Hyer's hand. The dimples deepened, and the maid's black eyes rested on Hyer with calculating approval. "Won't you step in, please?"

They entered a hall of medieval elegance. On their right a richly broidered cope hung in wide folds against the limestone wall, below it a carved walnut bench flanked by two wrought iron candlesticks, each shoulder-high and bearing a single massive white candle.

From the hall they were shown into a living room whose magnificence was on the order of a Bach fugue blared full voice from the amplifiers of some electronic organ of tomorrow. Walls and ceiling were of Eighteenth Century Jacobean carving, ornately masculine. The windows at the end of the room were embellished with Renaissance stained glass.

Along one whole wall, behind a Jacobean table with bulbous legs, there hung a tapestry depicting the more public pursuits of the lords and ladies of the Sun King's court.

On either side of the stone fireplace were sofas, upholstered in antique embossed velvet of ivory, green, and gold. Between them stood a low oval Italian table.

As the maid left them, Hyer murmured, "Times change." He grinned at Marcia, sat down delicately on the velvet sofa facing her, ran his fingers over its bold pattern.

"When I was a kid," he went on, "an aunt took me to a fortune teller in Des Moines. He had a tent rigged up in a vacant store and he was partial to red lights. He wore a gold ring in one ear and a long black beard, and he took both of 'em off when he went out at night to buy his grub on the other side of the tracks. One night some of us swiped the beard, and the next day he left town."

"In those days," Marcia said, "they didn't go in for the carriage trade. The carriage trade was too busy building railroads and grain elevators and factories to worry about omens." In a moment she added shortly, "Their women were kept pretty busy, too."

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AFTER a time, Hyer took a silver cigarette case from his pocket and studied it a moment. He clicked it open, removed the five cigarettes inside and dropped them into his pocket. Then he held the silver case out to Marcia.

"Ever see this before?" he asked.

Puzzled, she took it, examined it, and shook her head. "No." She returned the case to him. "Why?"

"Curiosity." Again Hyer stared at the case thoughtfully, breathed on its polished back, rubbed it briskly on his sleeve.

"All right," Marcia said. "I'm mystified. What about it?"

Before Hyer could reply, they heard a door open and voices approaching. One of the voices was deep, resonant, riding a roll of laughter, the other feminine, husky, petulant. Beyond the shallow stone arch, Clearse Owen passed, accompanied by a slight, red-haired girl in jodhpurs and a swagger coat. Her face was crimson.

For a moment after the pair had disappeared, the murmured dialogue was still audible. Then there was a silence, followed by a rustling, a fresh burst of laughter from Owen, the sound of a door opening and closing quickly.

Marcia was on her feet when the man reappeared opposite the stone arch. Hyer rose as the voice behind him boomed, "Why, Miss Marcia. I'd no idea— How do you do, my dear?"

Owen was coming rapidly into the room, his hands outstretched. He, too, wore riding togs. But the polished boots, smartly tailored breeches, and white shirt served to underscore his girth more effectively than his height.

In fact, as he came toward them he gave not so much the impression of a big man as a paunchy one. A fat man, if truth be told, with white teeth and black eyes in a swarthy face, his haycock of black hair somewhat imperfectly mounded.

As if conscious of this last, Owen raised one hand to smooth down his mane as he caught Marcia's reluctant glove with the other.

"You should have been more insistent," he said heartily, and there was a touch of genuine annoyance in his bantered reproach. "Harriet said merely a young lady and a gentleman."

"This is Mr. Hyer, Mr. Owen."

Owen stared brightly at Hyer's bland unsmiling face and laughed suddenly. "How do you do, Mr. Hyer?" He shook hands, motioned Hyer to resume his seat. "What can I do for you? By the way, spot of something for you people?"

Marcia said, "Thanks, no. Mr. Hyer," she went on bluntly, "is a detective. We want to know what you can tell us about Dad."

Owen's intent black eyes rested on Hyer again. He said, "Oh."

"What did you tell him about Rich?" Marcia demanded. Her voice was stiff.

"HIS aspects are—ominous, Marcia," Owen said in a grave tone, "very ominous. Being Libra, the transit of Saturn in his Seventh House— But you're not interested in that. Well, Lanning has always had a dangerous tendency toward passionate and precipitate—"

"That's not true!" Marcia said hotly.

"Perhaps I'm a better judge of that, Marcia. For the next three months, Hyer," the astrologer went on seriously to the man opposite, "Lanning will be especially susceptible to mental and emotional—oh, shall we say aberrations."

Marcia, who had held her ground up to this moment, moved away perceptibly along the sofa.

"I'm telling you this," Owen said to Hyer, "because I believe you're both interested in Lanning's welfare. Otherwise, it would be very bad taste, if not downright unethical." His eyes on Hyer, he moved his hand along the sofa back. "At Mr. Thayer's request, I had made a close and thorough study of—"

Hyer said, "What time did you and he get up to Manitou Lake that day?"

"A little after five."

"And fired the caretaker?"

Owen nodded. "Sandlund had been very careless."

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"Lost a key?"

"Yes."

"Anybody can lose a key."

"This was a very important key, Hyer. To the observatory enclosure. There's a great deal of delicate and expensive machinery housed there."

Hyer grinned. "So you hired a physicist as caretaker?"

Owen laughed. Marcia rose and went to stand by the fireplace. "A physicist. Splendid idea," Owen said, still laughing. "No, Mr. Thayer did the hiring. Only a man who can be trusted."

"Get him through an agency?"

"Yes."

Hyer took out his notebook and looked up brightly. "Which one?"

"I don't know. Mr. Thayer made the arrangement."

"Oh, but you know he can be trusted?"

"So Mr. Thayer assured me."

Hyer put away his notebook and Owen laughed again.

"Technicians there in the observatory?" Hyer asked.

"Yes. Two. All the time."

"Sleep in the observatory, do they?"

"Yes."

"What time did you tell him this about Lanning?" Hyer asked.

THE astrologer looked from Hyer to Marcia standing by the fireplace. Ignoring Hyer's question, he said, "You've never visited us at the observatory, have you, Marcia darling?"

She stared down at the logs without answering.

Hyer saw her mouth twitch and tighten. He said, "What time did you tell him this about Lanning?" He might as well have asked the question in an empty room. For perhaps thirty seconds no word was spoken. Slowly, hatefully, Marcia's glance lifted from the sleeping fireplace. She met the astrologer's brilliant black eyes and a tremor moved her. She caught her breath, looked quickly at Hyer.

"What took you to Washington on Thursday?"

Hyer's question was asked in a casual tone. He was disappointed. There was surprise in Owen's expression, to be sure, surprise and a certain patronizing amusement. But no shock.

"Washington? Thursday? I wasn't in Washington, Mr. Hyer."

"Some chap told Dawson," Hyer lied, "that he saw you there Thursday afternoon."

Anger lighted briefly in Owen's face, immediately controlled. He smiled. "Could that chap," he asked, and though the question was light, anger had not left his eyes, "have been Rich Lanning?"

Hyer saw Marcia's hand clench. "I don't know. I'll ask him. By the way, ever see this before?" He took out the silver cigarette case.

Owen stared at the case, frowning. His eyes slipped quickly to Marcia and then back to Hyer.

The detective grinned and had the satisfaction of seeing Owen flush. The next instant the astrologer laughed, and his genial front was again as smooth and seamless as ever.

Owen took the case, held it by the edges between thumb and fingertips, examined it, shook his head.

"Open it," Hyer said.

Owen pressed the catch. The case flew open. He stared at the virginal walls. "No," he said, "I've never seen this before." Still holding the case between thumb and fingertips, he handed it back to Hyer, open. His black eyes were touched with mockery now.

THERE was a brief pause. "We'll probably be in to see you again Wednesday," Hyer said. "We're going up to Manitou Lake tomorrow."

When they were driving away, Marcia said, annoyed, "Why did you tell him we were going to the camp tomorrow?"

"Oh, he's good company."

"Then you think he'll be at the camp, too?"

"If he isn't, I'll buy you a new hat."

She said, "Oh." In a moment she turned

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and looked at Hyer thoughtfully. "He knew about Rich being in Washington."

"And," said Hyer, "he's got a police record. If he'd handled that cigarette case like any normal human being," Hyer said regretfully, "I might have been able to tell you what kind of a police record, come dinnertime."

"So that's why you gave it to him. Fingerprints?"

"He got it, right away. He's smarter than he looks. That bay window throws you off. Oh, well, there'll be other ways to find out."

"Did he know you were lying about that chap who saw him in Washington?"

"If it hadn't been for the cigarette case routine, I'd say no. Maybe. He's a smooth article."

"And a vicious one."

Hyer said, "What's the matter?"

She looked at him and tried to smile. The smile was a failure. Her glance dropped and a flush burned in her cheeks. In a low voice, not looking at him, she said, "I shouldn't have— Will you go home quietly and forget that I came to you, Mr. Hyer?" Her eyes sought his, fearful, pleading.

Hyer said, "Why?"

Her voice was low, quick:

"I'm afraid. Afraid! Oh, not for my sake. For Rich's and—"

She swallowed and avoided his eyes. "For Dad's," she whispered. She caught his sleeve. "It's like groping into a dark silent room, knowing there's something big and powerful and—and grinning—reaching for you, throttling you, leaving you powerless and weak with no will of your own, making you—making you—do things, hateful things."

Her voice had dropped again to a whisper, but curiously without losing its force. It was as if she were trying desperately to persuade him of something, to convince him, even against her own laggard halting will.

Hyer said easily, "You'll be all right when you get some fresh air."

She choked. "That man's eyes!"

CHAPTER IX

MEETING AT DUSK

AT DUSK that evening, Hyer stepped out of a taxi in a neat Westchester barn-lot. A cow lowed, and through the vesper stillness came a firm two-beat hiss as an expert milker filled his pail in the stables. Chickens murmured sleepily in a white-washed henhouse, and beyond the silo there rose an abrupt skirling that died away to drowsy grunts.

Twilight was already deepening beneath the budded boughs of a dozen elms in the dooryard of the big gabled house, but high across the end of the white barn, bold block letters were still decipherable in the failing light: *McGovern's Health Farm.*

Hyer walked up a graveled path toward the lighted kitchen. As he reached the steps, a man came to the door and peered out. Against the light he made a solid chunky mass, square-hewn, and neckless as an Epstein granite, white sweatshirt drawn tight as a ham-sock over his massive shoulders and chest.

Hyer said, "Hello, Mac, how's our invalid?"

"Hank! Well, now that's a cerincidence." McGovern held the kitchen screen wide, and seized Hyer's hand in a bonecrusher grip, flattened nose and cauliflower ears wriggling. "We was just talkin' about you not more'n an hour ago. The kid's sayin' he wonders if maybe you forget he's up here."

"Ready to go home, is he?"

McGovern winked. "Come give a look." He winked again. "Don't make no noise."

Silently they crossed the twilit barn-lot, silently approached the stable door.

Inside, halfway down the spotless concrete aisle, an angular, well-muscled youth with carrotty hair, a freckled face, and the light of premature cynicism in his greenish eyes, sat at the flank of a Jersey cow pumping rhythmic streams into his foaming, half-filled pail. On his bony face was a look of rapt absorption.

Hyer said, "Hiya, boy," and walked into the stable, grinning.

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Orson Quick looked up. His greenish eyes widened. He glared. He said, "A fine pal!" bitterly. "Sneakin' up on a guy." His hands fell away from the Jersey's udder in sudden embarrassment.

"Orson's been doin' the milkin' for me every night, Hank," McGovern said between chortles. "Made me swear I wou'nt tell you nothin' about it. I didn't say a woid to Hank, Orson."

QUICK struggled to his feet from the milking stool, his freckles pale spots against a furious red. He seized the half-filled pail and flung it at McGovern, who ducked and roared with glee.

Quick whirled on Hyer. "One crack about 'Where's you going, my pretty maid?' and I'll crown you," viciously. The scowl became a reluctant grin. "Hi, Hank. Jeeps, I thought you was going to leave me up here till the cows— That is, I thought you'd forgot about me."

Hyer said, "I was never lucky that way. And I've got a job for you."

"We woikin' again?" eagerly.

"You are. You're going to have your horoscope looked at."

The youth scowled. "Nix. Listen, I had my appendix out just to please you, but if you think I'm going back in any hospital—"

"Horoscope, you lug. Don't you know what a horoscope is?"

"All right," suspiciously. "What?"

"Map of your stars."

Quick squinted. "So what?"

"Check," Hyer said brightly. "But right now, it's part of the business. Get your store clothes on. We're in a hurry."

As they drove out of the barn-lot twenty minutes later, Quick said, "Well, Hank?" He struggled to make the question casual and off-hand, but there was a boyish eagerness he could not conceal. "Jeeps, Hank," he confessed, "I was about to go stir-crazy up here. You don't think I was doing that milking because I *liked* it, do you?" scornfully. "What kind of a job, Hank?"

"We've got to locate a publisher, name of Nathan Thayer."

"Nobody dead?" in disappointment.

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Thayer, and forget I said it."

"But if we're supposed to—"

"Listen. Last Monday morning, Thayer had a scrap with his wife's nephew who belongs to some money Thayer's been trustee for. This nephew, Rich Lanning, was pretty sore. Thayer told him he was going to consult a star-gazer called Clearse Owen about what to do with the money, and Lanning blew his top."

"And crocked the star-gazer?"

"Shut up. He'd already taken a poke at him on consignment. In front of the Organdy Club about six hours before.

"Anyway, that night Thayer and this Owen had a session up at Thayer's summer place in the Adirondacks, and about the middle of the night Thayer drove away in a station wagon, and neither he nor the wagon's showed up since. But," Hyer said, "on Thursday, three days later, Thayer—or somebody—had his business partner cash two big checks and send the currency to Washington where Thayer—or somebody—picked it up."

"Yeah. Or somebody. That's an old one."

"It would be," Hyer said, "except that the money involved seems to have belonged to Rich Lanning."

"I don't blame him," Quick said promptly. "If anybody tried to rook me out of some cash with fortune-teller hooey, I'd do the same thing."

"And kill a man doing it?"

Quick said, "Well—" He shrugged. "What's my spot on this bill?"

"AT NINE o'clock tonight," Hyer answered, "you've got an appointment with this Clearse Owen."

"Why me?"

"You're a middleweight comer that Mike Gaynor's trying to decide whether to take on and manage or not. Mike wants to know if you look good to Jupiter and so he's made a date with Owen for you. Mike's a steady customer of Owen's, so it looks all right."

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"To everybody but me, maybe," Quick muttered. "All right. But why tonight, Hank?" aggrieved. "I'd figured first night I was back in New York I'd take in a show and—"

"It's tonight, because tomorrow Owen's going to be out of town."

"Oh, got everything worked out, have you?"

"I've got that worked out," Hyer said with satisfaction. "It's about the only thing I've done so far."

"Oh, and you're going to be tailing him?"

Hyer said, "The young and their curiosity. No, not exactly. Owen's going to be after me."

"You make everything so clear, Mr. Hyer."

"I dropped in to see him this afternoon. I got off on the wrong foot with him. He's dick-shy. He's going to be following me up to Manitou Lake tomorrow to see I don't get in trouble. And I'm going to be up there because Rich Lanning's already got himself in jail. For stealing a car."

"It sounds," Quick said after a time, "like a lot of fun, like the Marx brothers."

"This Owen," Hyer said thoughtfully, "is a big comet-and-meteor man with a lot of plush customers and he doesn't smell right."

"Hunch?"

"Partly," Hyer admitted. "There's a little more than that. I gave him my cigarette case and asked him if he'd ever seen it. It was pretty crude, all right. On the force, I'd be stuck back in uniform and sent to Staten Island for a trick like that."

"It didn't work?"

"It didn't work. He wouldn't touch the flat side of the case. Held it by the edges."

"Then chances are he's got a record."

"Chances are he has."

"Want me to find out, do you, Hank?"

Hyer said, "Sure. I thought you could drop in tonight and ask him."

Unmoved by his employer's sarcasm, Quick said, "Just leave it to me, pal."

"Wait a minute. All you're going around there for is to get the lay of the place, make eyes at the maid."

"Swell."

"She's a brunette by the name of Harriet who goes for five-spots and maybe little boys who act polite. And you're to get a good time exposure of Owen and shine up to *him,* too, see if he wants any errands run or windows washed."

CHAPTER X

SHOOTING STARS

QUICK was silent for a time. The lamps of Yonkers came into view, sprinkling Saw Mill River Valley with pricks of brilliance and mounting in tiers to cluster along the crest of the westward ridge before they sloped off invisibly to the Hudson.

Far ahead, the sky took on a faint flush where it overhung the myriad lights radiating from Times Square. The evening was sharp and clear and along the roadside crickets sang.

Quick said slowly, "I suppose there's a *Missus* Thayer," and at Hyer's assent, added, "How much insurance—?"

"I thought you promised me," Hyer said sternly, "that you'd lay off mystery stories."

"If I want to keep my eyes out for motives," the boy retorted, "why not?"

Hyer said, "Go ahead. All it'll get you is a place in somebody's dime novel. The time to get steamed up about theories is when the evidence begins to roll in."

"Awful set in his ways," the boy murmured, "but we humor him, because after all he's grampa. By the way," he went on quickly, before Hyer could fulminate, "suppose I find out whether this guy Owen was in Washington last Thursday when the money blew."

"He wasn't."

"Told you he wasn't, did he?"

"That's right."

"A fine cop you'd make," the boy said in scorn. "They wouldn't even *trust* you with a beat on Staten Island. Where'll you be, Hank," he went on quickly, "in case I want to get in touch with you tomorrow."

"Somewhere in the mountains." Hyer's answer was untouched by the ichor of enthusiasm. "I'll leave you a phone number."

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Quick sighed. "Seems like old times again. Only, jeeps, Hank," wistfully, "wisht we had a corpse."

"Let on to Owen that you're working for me," Hyer warned, "and maybe we'll have one."

"Don't worry," Quick said jauntily, "this time tomorrow, I'll have his whole biography for you."

Hyer let the boy out a block from Owen's house, cautioned him again, looked skeptical at an airy, "Sure, I'm the soul of tact," and, a touch of misgiving in his bland, good-humored face, watched Quick disappear.

THREE-QUARTERS of an hour later he left his cab in front of an ivy-hung apartment house not far from the tennis stadium in Forest Hills, told the driver to wait, and walked around the corner to run down a flight of steps to the service entrance.

Midway along a basement passage he paused before a door, listened, opened it and walked into a large square room.

There was an immediate stir in the room. Chairs scraped as three policemen playing cards under a bridge lamp in the far corner looked quickly toward him. A fourth, stretched on a canvas-sheeted ping pong table, sat up, plucking at his open tunic collar with one hand while he reached for his shoes with the other.

Hyer said, "As you were," cheerily, and walked across the room to drop in a chair near the card players who had returned stolidly to their game.

The officer on the ping pong table scratched his head and grappled a foot up over his knee to massage his bunions tenderly. "If you'd let us know you was comin', Hyer," he said with ponderous irony, "we'da baked a cake." There was a deep sigh. "Boy, how I hate to wake my dogs up."

Hyer grinned, pushed his hat back, and threw a leg over the arm of the wicker chair from which he was kibitzing.

To a ruddy gray-haired patrolman he said, "I hear you had a car lifted out from under your nose last week, Mulcahay."

Mulcahay studied his cards. "I meld eighty aces. What's that, Hank?"

"Dawson's. Fourteen-forty Greenway South?"

"Oh, that. Only it wasn't on my tour. I only come on at twelve that night. They'd already got it by that time. I remember noticing there wasn't a car parked in the whole block when I come on. Struck me funny and that's how I remember it."

"Who was on?" Hyer asked.

"D'Angelo. You know, that youngster that—"

"What's it to you, Hyer?" A hawk-nosed officer across the table asked sharply.

"I'm working on it."

"You're *woikin'* on—! My God!" There was a bellow of laughter. "Hank Hyer, the master mind, he's woikin' on a stolen car. They'll have you lookin' for lost pooches next."

"It wouldn't be the first time," someone else growled. Cards slapped to the table. "Eh what, Hank?"

But Mulcahay was interested. "If you took on a car case, Hank, there's something else in it, ain't there?"

"Five grand," Hyer said comfortably.

The four looked at him. Hawk-nose's scowl became a glare. "There's justice for you! One of us takes five bucks for an Exmas present and they got us up before the trial commissioner. But a guy like you—"

"There's the difference," Hyer said calmly. "I work for mine. When does this d'Angelo go on, Mulcahay?"

Across the room the door opened and a furnace man thrust his head in. "Hey, Mulcahay," he called. "Better get a move on. Been a shooting at Fourteen-forty Greenway South."

The pinochle game broke up without comment. The one on the ping pong table fell to lacing his boots rapidly.

Hyer and Mulcahay were at the door when a sharp, "Hey, Hyer," stopped the detective. He turned, encountered the familiar scowl, darkened now as Hawk-nose struggled with his tunic collar.

Hyer said, "What?"

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The scowl approached. "Seems to me you blew in at a most psycho-lo-gical moment, Mr. Hyer. Fourteen-forty Greenway South, eh? Place that car was stole from? And you just talkin' about it, and about money—folding money?"

Hyer said, "I could be twins, you know," and went out, slamming the door on the other's "Hey, wait a minute."

CHAPTER XI

DEAD AT MIDNIGHT

HE CAUGHT up with Mulcahay at the corner, said, "I've got a cab. You can hop on the side. May look better that way."

They had gone three blocks when Mulcahay stuck his head in the window and said, "What you mean, Hank—about it looking better that way?"

"You heard Nosey."

"Oh, him. How could you have anything to do with this, Hank?"

Hyer said, "Maybe I'm responsible."

"What?"

"Well, here we are. Let's see."

There was, befitting a neighborhood so chaste and urbane, no commotion about Fourteen-forty Greenway South. At the curb stood a green and white police car, its radio rumbling. Dogwood, magnolia, Japanese cherry, and apple trees made luminous masses along the dark curving street.

Through the stillness came a faint metallic rumble as a Long Island express rushed up out of the Kew Gardens cut.

Hyer, stepping out of his cab and following Mulcahay up the flagstone path toward Dawson's quiet Georgian house, breathed more easily.

Dawson himself came to the door at the officer's ring. He said, "Hello, Mulcahay," and then, "Oh, hello, Hyer. Come in."

He shook hands with the detective and detained him briefly as Mulcahay walked on toward the living room. "So you've heard about our sniping, have you? When you phoned," Dawson went on, "I didn't know I'd have this kind of a welcome for you. Have to excuse the appearance of the house. Housekeeper's been away for a month and the place looks a little like a mausoleum. Oh yes, I have another visitor."

Hyer followed him into a living room whose furniture was draped with white muslin dust covers. The men from the radio car were talking to Mulcahay. One of them looked up, said, "Johnny on the spot, aren't you, Hank?"

Dawson said, "I see you gentlemen know each other."

"What happened?" Hyer asked. Mulcahay, he saw, looked troubled.

The one from the radio car said, "Some kid with a rifle let a wild one loose. It went through Mr. Dawson's window." He looked at Hyer sharply. "You wouldn't know anything about it?"

(*Please turn the page*)

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Hyer said, "Me?" innocently.

"Yeah, you. What are you doing here?"

"Mr. Hyer called up about an hour ago and made an appointment with me," Dawson said easily.

"Sure," Mulcahay added, "Hank's workin' on Mr. Dawson's stolen car."

The radio crew gaped, said in chorus, "Workin' on a stolen *car?*" The articulate one pushed back his cap and regarded Hyer with new interest.

In his eyes was a look of bewilderment and surprise not unmixed with wary caution. Such a look must Priam have bent on a certain horse-merchant, the elders of Zion on a renascent Saul of Tarsus, Gulliver on the Houynyms. "Look," he said slowly, "let's get this straight."

"I engaged Mr. Hyer to recover my car for me," Dawson put in.

"Sure," Mulcahay added generously, "that's what Hank told us down at—" He broke off and his discomfort suddenly took on a personal tinge.

Dawson said, "Have another cigar around, gentlemen, before you go." He held an opened box out to the three officers.

The bemused one reached in absently, his eyes not leaving Hyer's face.

"Sorry I caused so much commotion reporting it," Dawson said. "I reached for the phone and called in before—"

"That's all right, that's all right. Hey, Hyer, I'd like to talk to you a minute. Come on, Mulcahay, we'll drop you back at the booth."

WHEN Hyer returned to the living room three minutes later, Dawson said, "Well! Rather suspicious friends you have. Karl went up to the bathroom a little while ago. He'll be down— Here he comes now."

There was a heavy, deliberate tread on the stairway.

Hyer said, "Karl?"

"Sandlund. The caretaker Nat fired." He looked toward the hall, smiled, said cordially, "Karl, this is Mr. Hyer. Mr. Hyer, Mr. Sandlund."

The man who entered the room was huge, blond, with a flat expressionless face, little wide-spaced blue eyes that rested on the detective momentarily without warmth. He looked over Hyer's head.

"Karl has something to tell Miss Thayer," Dawson went on genially. "When he couldn't find her, he looked me up. Sit down, Karl. Mr. Hyer and I are going to run upstairs. We'll be back shortly."

The blond giant made no sign of comprehension, but after a moment's hesitation he walked to a chair and sat. He wore his clothes with the stiffness of a man not accustomed to urban garb.

His hairy wrists hung out of the scanty sleeves of a blue serge jacket; a stiff collar was unkind to his massive neck.

When he and Hyer emerged from the stairs into the second-floor hall, Dawson eyed the detective quizzically and said, "Maybe we've got something here, Hyer."

"He came in after the shooting, did he?"

Dawson nodded. "About ten minutes."

Hyer said, "What are you going to do with him?"

"Keep my hands on him," grimly, "until after he's had a chance to tell Marcia what's on his mind."

Hyer said, "You've got nerve."

Dawson laughed. "What would you have me do? Turn him over to the police?"

"Well—"

"And break my word to Marcia? I promised her I'd see that nothing about Nat got out until she was ready."

Hyer said, "Oh. The accident angle on this shooting was your idea, was it?"

Dawson nodded.

"Yes. It startled the hell out of me and I called headquarters on a reflex. Then I had to cover it up."

He showed Hyer across the hall and into a small study filled with books, sheaves of proof, piles of manuscript. A desk projected from the opposite wall, its end fitting snugly below the sill of a wide window. Beside the desk on a small table were a typewriter and a portable dictaphone.

"There's the hole," Dawson said grimly. "Lucky I was leaning back, rubbing my eyes. A split second before, I had been bending over that manuscript on the desk—

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where I'd have taken it squarely in the temple. There's the bullet."

He pointed to a small hole in the plaster near the ceiling.

Hyer went to the window, peered at the conical hole in the pane and passed his finger over its smoothly beveled lip. He looked at Dawson. "Traveling pretty fast for a .22."

Dawson nodded. "That occurred to me."

Hyer glanced down. Minute slivers of glass winked up at him from the typed sheets, from the desk blotter. He studied them a moment, knelt, wet his finger tip and picked up several from the floor, from the blue velvet cushion of the chair, said, "Ouch," and plucked a shard from his finger.

HE STOOD up, walked across the room and pulled a chair below the hole in the wall. Standing on the chair, he could, by rising on tiptoe, bring the hole to eye-level. But, instead of examining it, he merely pressed a finger to it, turned, and let the back of his head rest against the finger. "Turn out the light."

Puzzled, Dawson obeyed.

Hyer stood for a moment staring toward the window.

Dawson said, "Oh, you're lining up the hole."

"It's a rough way to do it," Hyer agreed. "But it works pretty well. All right. They were standing across the street beside that house, in the bush. House's unoccupied, is it?"

"Yes. It's been closed since November. The people are in California."

Hyer got down as Dawson turned on the light. "I had a talk with Owen this afternoon," he said. "He seemed to know all about Lanning's being in Washington last Thursday."

Dawson said, "Um. Instructive." He sat down at the desk and motioned Hyer to a blue leather chair. "I had an idea today, Hyer."

Hyer looked unimpressed.

"We all have 'em. At a time like this ideas are a dime a hundred. Go on."

"Do you remember what I told you about those signatures on the checks?"

Hyer nodded. "The experts said they looked genuine."

"Why couldn't they have been traced? From a genuine signature?"

"They could have. If you haven't got a forger's hand, that's one way to do it. And," he added ironically, "I suppose whoever got that package in Washington laid the receipt down over a cancelled check at the window and traced—"

"Cancelled check. You get it, don't you?"

"I get it," Hyer said without enthusiasm. "I'm away ahead of you, and it's probably as crazy as it sounds."

"If Owen wrote those checks, he could have traced the signature from a check Nat had given him some time before."

"Why from a check?"

"Nat had a peculiar twist when he signed his name to a check. He never used that particular signature on anything else."

"And probably Owen would keep a check around just for sentiment's sake without cashing it."

"He wouldn't need to. He could have made a tracing of a signature and kept the tracing."

Hyer grinned. "And the experts would have yipped forgery in twenty seconds. That's the first test they make—size 'em up for absolute identity."

"All right, then," Dawson said, "Look here, it oughtn't be a hard matter to dig out all Nat's cancelled vouchers that had gone through Owen's hands. If we can find a couple that match identically with those on the cheeks—" He broke off, studied Hyer's skeptical grin a moment, said stubbornly, "All right. But I'm going to look into it. If we find even one identical specimen, that will mean something, won't it?"

Hyer nodded. "That'll mean something. Then where does the Swede fit into all this?"

Dawson shook his head. "I don't know. He says he's got something to tell Marcia."

"Want me to stay around and go up to the Thayers' with you?"

Dawson laughed. "Don't be silly."

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Hyer looked doubtful. Then he shrugged. "Maybe," he said, "you won't take to a part I cooked up for you this afternoon. That's why I came out tonight." He described his mendacious report of a bystander having seen Owen in Washington, confessed that he had fathered the lie on Dawson. "If he brings it up, I hated for you to miss a cue."

"Don't worry. I'll take care of it."

"How about the two of us working on this Sandlund?" Hyer asked. "Maybe we can find out what his secret is."

Dawson shook his head. "You don't know Karl. He'll tell Marcia, but nobody else. I've got a call in for her now. She's out somewhere. Oh, we can try, of course, but it'll be a lot simpler to let him have his own way. He's stubborn as a mule."

ON HIS way out, Hyer glanced into the living room curiously. The great Swede sat stolidly as they had left him. He might have been hypnotized for all the attention he paid to his immediate surroundings.

Hyer had a momentary twinge of misgiving. But, because this partook of melodrama, he ignored it—an ill-judged bit of stoicism he was later to regret bitterly.

When he left Dawson, Hyer directed his driver to make the first turn, and halfway down the block told him to stop. He got out of the cab, walked jauntily back between two houses, cut across a wide back lawn and came out at the rear of the house across the street from Dawson's.

Here he reconnoitered a few moments, standing first in the shadow of a giant hydrangea beside the porch and then behind a lilac tree farther out in the yard.

From both vantage points he could see the lighted window of Dawson's study. Satisfied, he walked out to the street and rounded the corner again, making a careful study of the curb as he went.

At a drugstore near the station he telephoned Clearse Owen's apartment, learned that the astrologer was out, that he had been out for nearly two hours, and had left no word as to his time of return. Hyer said, no, there was no message, and hung up.

He walked across from the drugstore to the police booth opposite the Inn.

"When you see Mulcahay," he said to the patrolman lounging there, "tell him a friend says there's a present for him down a manhole about twenty yards off Greenway South. He'll probably understand, but if he doesn't, there's no harm done."

With the air of a man reasonably satisfied at life's course, he reëntered his cab and returned to Manhattan.

A little after one, he walked into the St. Julian hotel, crossed the lobby without seeing a familiar face, and entered a telephone booth. Here he dialed a number and presently said, "I'd like to talk to Sim Perkins . . . Hyer . . ." After a wait, "Hello, Sim. You columnists know everything, I wonder if— . . ." He listened, grinned. "Thanks, I'll call him . . . No, it's a gag . . . Really. Would I hold out on you? . . . That's right," he said cheerfully, and hung up.

A moment later he called another number, asked to speak to Inspector Turner. "Hello, Inspector . . . Did they, now? Isn't that fine? . . ." He squinted. "A Savage .250? Pretty expensive gadget for a kid to be knocking around with, I'd say, and to be stuck down a manhole like that . . . Filed off, were they? . . . Me, I just had a hunch, that's all . . . Well, where else could they have dropped it? . . . Sorry, Inspector, I have to be out of town tomorrow . . . Maybe next day . . . Sure, I'll come in . . . When did I ever stand you up? . . ." Listening, he winced.

He hung up, left the booth, started toward the bar, stopped, yawned, thought of the day's expedition facing him, and piously directed his teps toward an exit and the nearest cab rank.

As he got out of the taxi in front of his Bank Street house, a figure emerged from a car parked across the street.

HYER took his change, absently dropped a half dollar in the driver's hand as his eyes widened. An instant later he

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glanced wildly at his palm, gasped, *"Hey!"* and took an anguished step after the disappearing cab, holding out the quarter he had intended as tip.

Marcia Thayer, coming up to him, said, "What's the matter?"

Hyer turned on her angrily. "What are you doing here?"

"Talking to you."

Hyer's eyes dropped dismally to the coin in his hand, lifted with a flash of false hope. "You didn't get the number of that cab, did you?" He shrugged. "First time in my life, I slipped up on a detail like that."

"Like what?"

"Like noticing the hack licenses in a cab I was using." A look of alarm appeared in his eyes. Then he shrugged again, said, "Oh well, little thing like that—" with unnecessary optimism. "What's happened?"

She said, "I think I had a call from my father."

That stray token of warning plucked at Hyer again, and again he shook it off. He said, "Come upstairs," and tried to elude the brittle ominous sense that something was decidedly not according to schedule.

The instant he opened the door this last leaped into wild certainty. But for the third time, like a rational man, he sought stubbornly to control it.

"I'm getting 'em, too," he muttered.

"What?"

"The creeps. My hall light's out." He pointed to the second floor.

Marcia, looking up, shivered.

"Mixing in with these mystics," Hyer continued, "has given me—"

"Wait," she said hoarsely, and the fingers that seized his arm were tense, urgent. "Beryl telephoned to Clearse Owen tonight. About dinner time. She must have been terribly frightened to go to him again after— Never mind. But she talked to Owen. I heard her. She told me about it later."

When the girl was silent, her eyes wide and terrified, Hyer said, "Well?" For an instant his own neck prickled.

"Owen told Beryl," the girl whispered, "that Sandlund was on his way to New York and that—that—"

Hyer said, "That what?" testily. He shook the girl's arm.

She said, breathless:

"That before morning something would probably happen to Karl if—"

With an animal reflex, Hyer's hand was over her open mouth in a flash. Her terrified scream was but a choking gasp under his muffling palm.

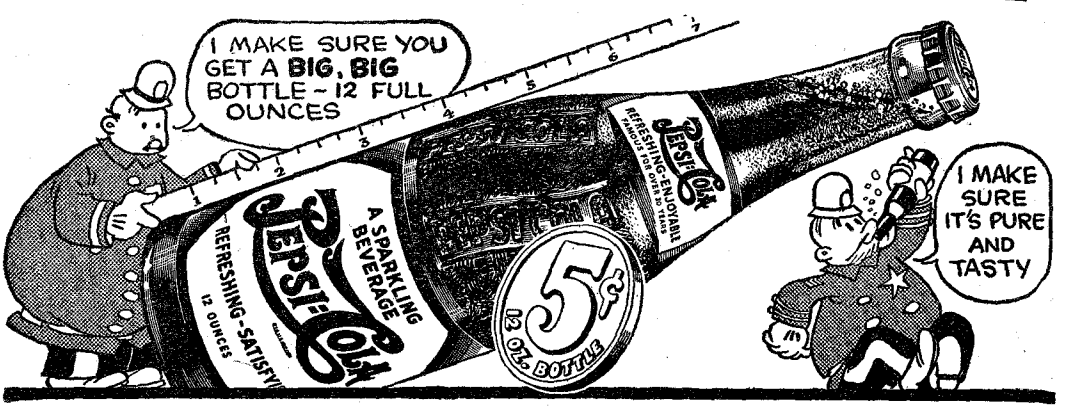
Then, as Hyer followed her horrified gaze, his scalp tightened in a spasm.

From the second floor hall, between the banister uprights, a man's arm had dropped with a sudden, unmistakable limpness.

It hung, swinging gently like a pendulum, over the stair well.

It was a long arm, in a scanty blue serge sleeve. The wrist, matted with blond hair, thrust out from the shiny cuff in final embarrassed pathos.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



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MEN of DARING

by Stookie Allen

SALT-WATER SAGA
ANOTHER SAGA OF THE SEA WAS WRITTEN WHEN A BATTERED 50-FOOT CHINESE JUNK, ITS CREW ALMOST SPEECHLESS FROM EXHAUSTION AND HUNGER, LIMPED INTO PORT AT QUATSINO, BRITISH COLUMBIA, EARLY LAST OCTOBER.
CAPT. JOHN ANDERSON, AMERICAN STEAMSHIP PILOT, AND HIS PRETTY RUSSIAN WIFE LEFT SHANGHAI IN APRIL, 1939, IN THE TAI PING.
Capt. Anderson and his wife
AN INCOMPETENT CHINESE CREW BECAME SEASICK AND WERE REPLACED BY 4 NORWEGIANS. THE MOTOR FAILED, A LEAK WAS SPRUNG AND THE SAILS LOST IN A 3-DAY STORM. SOON AFTER A FRESH START, A TYPHOON STRUCK BUT THEY RODE IT OUT.
STORMS BLEW THEM FAR OFF THEIR COURSE. FOOD AND WATER RAN SHORT. THEY CAUGHT A FEW SEAGULLS AND WERE ABOUT TO KILL THEIR...
PIRATES ATTACKED THE JUNK BUT IT OUT-RAN THEM TO JAPAN!
MASCOTS, A DOG AND CAT, TO EKE OUT REDUCED RATIONS OF A BOWL OF RICE EACH PER DAY WHEN THEY SIGHTED LAND.
ANOTHER STORM STRUCK THEM OFF ALASKA AND THEY ACCEPTED A LINE FROM A COAST GUARD BOAT BUT HAD TO CAST LOOSE. ABOUT TO DRIFT ON THE ROCKS, THE TAI PING WAS SIGHTED AND TOWED TO QUATSINO, COMPLETING THE 6,000-MILE CROSSING OF THE PACIFIC IN 108 DAYS!

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

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My Brother Knows

By ROBERT GRIFFITH

Author of "Monsieur Sure-Thing," "North Ten Degrees," etc.

THE surveyor squinted through the telescope of his instrument and shouted orders to the axmen as they cleared away brush that hid the surveyor from the rodman, far ahead.

Rapidly the crew worked down the mountainside, leaving behind a narrow swath in the forest, the line marked by gum-bleeding blazes in the tall spruces. Big Burgess, with his jaw set belligerently, stood behind the man at the instrument.

They were running out the boundary line between the old Watrous farm and Burgess' newly-bought estate. The farm belonged to the two Watrous brothers: thin, stooping Eben, who stood alone now, watching the survey's progress with uneasy eyes, and Jasper. Jasper was squat and odd of face, half-witted.

Eben glanced nervously over his shoulder. Jasper had just disappeared into the woods. He hadn't liked the way the survey line was going. He had protested, as well as he could, to Burgess. His protest hadn't been very effective. Eben himself couldn't understand Jasper's gibbering speech when he was excited.

But the half-witted one's interference had enraged Burgess, and he had struck him and knocked him floundering. Jasper had got up and run into the woods.

Eben had stood and silently watched this. Burgess thought he was afraid. That was because Burgess had been misinformed about Eben. Even in East Derby, where the brothers had lived fifteen years, Eben wasn't understood.

Mistaking the affection of the brothers for likeness, people called them "those half-witted Watrous boys." For love of his odd brother Eben couldn't assert that he was more intelligent; that would have been disloyal.

He took the gibes of the villagers silently; and because he was a very sensitive man, he had nothing to do with the people of East Derby.

BUT as the survey went on, Eben's face grew bitter. He hesitantly approached Burgess. "Mist' Burgess," he said. "You sure this is 'cordin' to the deeds?"

Burgess snapped: "Certainly!"

"Don't look it to me," Eben mumbled awkwardly. "Seems t' keep a-bearin' east. Lord, way she runs now, won't come 'thin ten rod of our corner."

"Your corner?" Burgess snorted.

"Yes, sir," Eben said. "The big maple stump that sets side of the road—"

"How do you know it's your corner? This line hasn't been surveyed in fifty years. You just *guess* it's the corner. This survey will show where the corner really is."

Eben ventured: "M'brother Jasper says that old maple stump—"

"Your brother! And you!" Burgess spat out. "Do you expect me to take the word of a pair of—of—"

That's when Eben backed quickly away. He couldn't provoke Burgess further. To do so would bring the thing he dreaded: to hear himself called a half-wit.

But, watching from one side, his thin face was grim. Though there was no marked line between the properties, the difference in the wood—tall spruces on the Watrous land, and scrubby trees on the other—was to Eben and Jasper evidence of where the line should have gone.

Argosy

Short Short

Story

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At first, where the difference had been pronounced, Eben had found no fault; for half the length of the line it had been surveyed to his satisfaction. But then, as the line crossed a deep gulch and continued along the long even slope toward the river, it had seemed to bear too far easterly. And the farther they went, the surer Eben was that Burgess was deliberately robbing him.

He saw the covert gestures that passed between Burgess and the surveyor. And resentment changed his lean face.

The Watrous farm was small; the Watrous brothers were poor. But it wasn't so much the few rods of land they would lose that made Eben bitter. It was the suspicion that Burgess was openly stealing his land because he thought that he could put anything over on the half-witted Watrous boys.

Yet, for fear of the gibes it might bring, and because he knew nothing of the complicated-looking instrument and the complex maps, and because he didn't understand the clumsy wording of the deeds, Eben said nothing. He couldn't bear to give Burgess cause to call him an idiot to his face.

Now the survey crew worked its way down toward the river. In a few minutes they would finish the job. They would set up a corner-post, and that would be final. Eben couldn't hire a surveyor; he couldn't take the matter to court. He was too poor.

It was becoming darker in the woods as evening came on, and the spring air turned cold. Eben, standing impotently by as the crew passed, felt the cold and remembered that in the heat of the afternoon he had removed his coat. He had left in on the limb of a crotched birch, far up the line.

Might as well go back and get it. Nothing he could do now to change the course of the survey. Eben started trudging up the narrow lane cut in the spruces. A short way up the line he turned off into a path, where it was easier walking.

HE WAS nearing the place where he had left his coat when he caught sight of Jasper. The half-witted brother was kneeling in the cleared survey line. Eben was surprised to see that Jasper had his old single-shot 45-70 rifle.

Watching his brother, puzzled, Eben saw him reach down and pull up one of the stakes over which the instrument had been set. Jasper placed a tall, straight sapling, stripped of branches, in the hole where the stake had been.

Muttering agitatedly to himself, Jasper hurried with his peculiar, hitching gait up the line. Eben followed noiselessly. At another instrument point, just below where the survey had begun, Jasper pulled up another stake and set in its place another sapling.

Then, while Eben stared, Jasper knelt behind the second sapling. And lifted the rifle to his shoulder.

Eben remembered: Burgess, always standing behind the surveyor! A rifle shot fired along the line of those two saplings would strike Burgess squarely in the back.

Eben screamed: "Jasper! Drop that gun! *Jasper!*"

The shattering discharge of the big gun punctuated his cry.

Eben ran frantically toward his brother. "Jasper! What'n damnation you up to? Lord, boy—that's murder!"

Amazed and terrified, Eben stood staring at his brother.

Jasper was jumping up and down, his face distorted in peculiar glee, gibbering crazily. Pointing down the long cut in the spruces. The survey crew was hidden by foliage of tall trees in the gulch.

But Jasper was uncannily handy with that old rifle. It was certain that the big 45-70 slug would cut through the light foliage and reach its mark.

Murder. Eben passed a trembling hand over his fear-stricken face. Murder.

"Poor cuss. Poor Jasper. What'll they do with you now?"

Jasper leapt and chattered, pointed down the lane through which his bullet had passed. For a moment, Eben considered hiding his brother; then his lips compressed. He'd bring Jasper back to face the music. Silently he took his brother's hand, and led him down the mountain.

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THEY saw the survey crew, when they emerged from the path, gathered about a bulky object that lay on the ground. Eben steeled himself. He walked toward the men, gently grasping his brother's arm.

"I've brought him," Eben said simply. "He didn't try to run away."

Then he waited stolidly for their anger and their abuse.

Somebody laughed nastily. "Why should he? He's shot his own cow."

Eben's head snapped about. Burgess stood before him! Eben's eyes went to the object on the ground—one of his own cows!

Jasper was babbling excitedly. He pulled away from Eben and ran to the tall maple stump just beyond the dead cow. The stump he had said was the corner.

Eben stared at the stump, and abruptly a change came over him. He straightened; his eyes lit up and his jaw jutted. He turned to face Burgess.

"Mister," he snapped, "I'll give you one minute to get off'n my prop'ty!"

For an instant they just gaped at him, Burgess and his men.

"*Your* property?" Burgess blustered. "Why, you poor fool, you can see where we've set the corner-post; ten rods east of here—"

Eben's laugh had an unpleasant sound.

"Fool? Wal, *I* may be; but m' brother Jasper's smart enough to make up fer me! He's got that there line surveyed out by a real inst'ment—one that can't be made to run a crooked line!"

Eben held up Jasper's old 45-70 rifle, and pointed to the big bullet hole at one side of the broad maple stump. And then he grabbed Burgess by the shoulder and yanked him roughly about. And booted him vigorously in the rump.

"Now *git!* Y' gol darn thievin' skunk!" he bellowed. "Or I'll use this here inst'ment fer suthin' 'sides a-runnin' lines!"

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The Harp and the Blade

By JOHN MYERS MYERS

A woman led these horsemen, and all I had to wear was a sword and a few bushes

FINNIAN the Irish bard, a man equally dextrous with harp and blade, has become accustomed to the chaos that has spread throught all Europe since the fall of Charlemagne's empire. He attends strictly to his own affairs—until the night he meets an eerie little man who claims to be an ancient Pict. This gnome places a strange judgment on Finnian. "While you are in my land," he says, "you will aid any man or woman in need."

Very soon Finnian is involved in the turmoil that he had expected merely to watch. At a tavern he has a brawl with a local baron, one Chilbert and later he learns from Father Walter, a warlike abbot, that Chilbert dreams of conquering all that region of France. Father Walter has not yet decided whether he will take a martial stand against Chilbert, but he tells Finnian that the robber baron's strongest enemy is Conan the Breton.

IT IS Conan whom the Irish bard rescues from Chilbert's minions. Finnian and Conan make a heroic stand against their attackers, after having sworn blood-brotherhood; and in the last moment a band of Conan's men come to their aid. But by then Finnian is delirious from his wounds; when finally he awakes, he is in the care of a woodsman. Conan, he hears, still lives, but has not recovered consciousness.

His wounds healed at last, Finnian finds refuge once again in a monastery. There he spends his time fishing and discussing the classics with a learned monk. Then, impelled perhaps by the strange spell of the old Pict, Finnian gives succor to a wounded man, who tells him that the ravaging Danes are sailing up the river.

Learning about the Danes, the good fathers clear out of their monastery with dispatch. But Finnian stays behind. When the Vikings arrive, he unlatches the monastery door, sits

This story began in the Argosy for June 22

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down with a glass of wine, and waits calmly for the Danes to come charging in behind their battering ram. . . .

CHAPTER XIII

COME IN, VIKINGS

I'VE never seen more surprised looking men than the ten Danes who breezed through that door carrying a heavy, utterly useless log. Braking, they stood there looking foolish and gaping at where I sat on the table idly swinging my legs.

"Why don't you put it down?" I added to their astonishment by speaking to them in their own language. "It's a pretty hot day to be running around with that sort of thing."

The bandy-legged Viking had followed them and was leaning on his ax in the doorway, glaring at me uncertainly. I was obviously no part of a monk, and what's more I was grinning at him good humoredly. I felt friendly, too, and not a bit concerned. It's perfectly easy to get along with Danes when you haven't got anything they covet. He began truculently enough, however.

"What are you doing here?"

"Drinking." I illustrated.

"Why didn't you open the door when I spoke?"

"Get your own men to open a door for you," I told him calmly. "Of course, you did, but it shouldn't have taken that many. When a door isn't locked one man can move it quite easily."

The log plumped to the ground. It takes a little time for a Dane to see what jokes he can see, but he gets a lot of fun out of one when he does. They roared, and finally Bow-legs as well as the other Vikings who had crowded to the door to peer in whooped with laugher also. I laughed with them and slapped the demijohns invitingly.

"Work first and drink later," the commander said sententiously. "Anybody here but you?"

"No," I replied offhandedly. "They got wind of you and cleared out last night. I happened to be passing by and moved in, as there was no other decent place to sleep."

He thought of something, and his voice grew edged again. "I suppose you've taken everything."

I smiled to myself. Nothing hurts a Dane's feelings like pre-thieving him. "There's a lot of junk in there that you might like," I reassured him. "The only thing I wanted was this. *Skoal!*"

After directing his men, who went about the business of pillaging like the old hands they were, the chief decided to join me. "I'm Thorgrim Gunnarson," he said when I had filled a mug for him and introduced myself.

Looking at both him and the big ax, which was not Danish made, though I had seen others like it, I thought a minute. Where Danes gather they tell about those among them who have distinguished themselves, and it's part of my business to know such things. This was not a great Viking leader, but none the less a man who had won himself a name.

"You're Thorgrim the Varanger," I said. "Sweyn Bucktooth killed your brother, you returned west, called him to a skerry, and slew him."

He was delighted at being recognized, and from that point on I was in a favorable position to deal with him. "How far up are you going?" I asked.

He smacked his lips ruminatively. "That depends on what there is to take and how much trouble there's likely to be in the taking. Do you know anything about that?"

As I knew how small a force he had, and as long as I was counting on going with him, I didn't want him to go any farther. There would be hard, fruitless fighting in which I had no urge to take part.

"There's a man just up the line called Chilbert who is considered very tough," I informed him. "He doesn't like any one but himself to do the thieving, and he has a lot more men than you have to back him up."

Thorgrim nodded. "I'll go up and take

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a look at him. If it doesn't seem feasible I won't land."

I'd pressed my point as far as I could. "How's the luck been treating you?" I inquired.

"Oh, not so bad," he said cheerfully. "We're not strong enough to attack any really fortified towns, and the Loire has been pretty well picked over; but there are always slaves. They're the most valuable thing next to gold itself."

"Everybody around here seems to have cleared out," I said.

"We'll round up some, though," he responded confidently. "These Frankish villeins seldom run far. They're more afraid of a territory they don't know than they are of being caught."

THE miscellaneous booty from the abbey was being piled up outside. Then inevitably they set fire to the place. The abbey was soon burning furiously, and the Danes watched, pleased.

Others, meanwhile, had been sent inland to capture any people and commandeer any livestock that hadn't fled or been driven out of reach. Thorgrim and I took a demijohn to the shade of a tree so that we could loaf in comfort until the foragers returned.

"I was told you had seven ships," I remarked. "Where are the other three?"

"I sent them to scour the north shore," he answered. "They're supposed to meet us back here before dark."

Wine in quantity in the middle of a hot day put me to sleep. By the time I'd waked, the raiding parties had started to sift back; nor was Thorgrim's optimism unfounded.

Between them they had seized enough cows and pigs to feed the pirates, in addition to one horse which Thorgrim sacrificed to Odin, hanging it and cutting its throat. There were, too, nine assorted peasants, of which none was old or a very young child. The latter is too poor a risk, being liable to perish on the voyage to the slave market.

Nobody injured them, because slaves are valuable, but they grouped together weeping or staring around with piteous eyes. A man who travels with Danes has often to harden his stomach, but I didn't look at the captives any more than I could help.

Not that they could be physically much worse off than in the life France allowed them; indeed, it was probable that they would be much better fed, plus being infinitely better protected. Moreover, in so far as slavery is concerned, a villein's status is only nominally above it; but at least here they could suffer among their own kind and with their own families.

When the meat was eaten and the wine drinking began it was time for me to make my bid. For though I was on good terms with Thorgrim, nothing definite had been accomplished toward my accompanying him when he left. It was up to me to show that I would be an addition to the voyage, and I rose with my harp.

"Shut up and listen to the *skald!*" others echoed my roar for silence.

Danes only want one thing, a ballad to satisfy their concept of adventure. Nevertheless, a certain amount of care was necessary as to the exact choice of subject. There are so many feuds and factions among them that it is well to know a band's leanings and connections before praising a leader or recounting a battle. I avoided this risk by choosing an incident from the far past.

"I'll sing to you," I called out, "of how Hogni got the Odin-sword."

"That's fine!"

"Silence for the *skald!*" another took it on himself to command.

MERRY and on the way to being drunk, they were in the mood to hear any fast-moving tale that didn't insult their loyalties. Hogni was a popular figure with Danish poets, and his whole story was well known to everyone present. An incident of his life could, therefore, be told without preface. With one motion I swept the strings and flung out my arm dramatically.

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The king of the trolls caroused at yule,
Whiling winter with wine from the south,
Never fearing a foeman's coming
To pierce his hill, piled high with snow.

No gloom was there, for glowing gold
Roofed the room where rang their songs,
Driving dark from deep in the caves
Where trolls hide well the treasure they win.

But one-eyed Odin entered the sleep
Of Hogni, telling the hero a sword
Of Wayland's making might be his
If he forbore to fatten on rest.

Up rose Hogni to run on staves,
Skimming the drifts on skis, as petrels
Skim the waves of the wife-bereaver,
Swift on slopes as a sliding otter.

I glanced to make sure that I was holding Thorgrim's attention. He was manifesting interest, though I couldn't be certain how much. There was a nice but important point involved in the extent of his enthusiasm. Should I be forced to ask for inclusion in his company I would be consigning myself to the position of just another one of his followers. If, on the other hand, he should be moved to issue an invitation, I would be going along as a guest and an equal.

The cold mirkwood might cast no terror
On such a man. His mood was baneful.
He'd slake his longing or sleep forever,
Win the weapon or waste in his howe.

He found the drift his dream had showed him,
Winnowed the woof of winter's loom,
Found the rift in the rocks behind it
And entered the earth there, eager for plunder.

A fearful fire-drake formed by Loki
Was there to watch, but winter had lulled it;
Certain of safety, sightless with sleep,
Traitor to trust, the trolls' guard lay.

Thorgrim was watching his men. His own judgment of the poem was of less moment to him, naturally, than their reaction. If I proved someone who could help to keep them good humored, and therefore easily handled, why that was all he wanted to know.

No man-made sword could mar its life:
Steel-hard scales were scornful of axes.
Woe was Hogni's should he wake it,
As well he knew; but he never wavered.

Hardy the hero who held his course
Past such a monster, mocking the peril!
Boldly he passed it, bored through the hill—
A dangerous mole in that dark passage.

I WAS using every trick of harp, voice and gesture in the trade, and at the next line I caught up my cup with a flourish.

Soon he heard "skoal!" from skinkers by hundreds,
And, following further, found the cavern
Glorious with gold and glittering jewels,
Splashes of fire in a splendor of colors.

Careless the king sat, cracking jests,
Proud of his thanes nor thinking of evil;
But Hogni was grim and gripped his ax.
He would not turn with his task undone.

Wild were the warriors, wine-sodden trolls!
When Hogni harried the hall of their monarch.
Fierce was his onset, fast as an osprey's.
He made no pause to ask pardon of any.

They were with me now, exhilarated by Hogni's swift daring, and they laughed at the understatement. Downstream I saw the other three galleys pulling toward us. Fortunately all the rest had their eyes on me and failed to notice. I twanged my harp loudly to announce the climax of the lay.

Before the ruler could roar for help
Hogni's ax was high above him.
Keen was the edge the king saw then;
Trapped in his hall the troll sat moveless.

"What will the hero have for my ransom?"
The ring-bestower wrathfully asked him.
"I'll give you gold or gorgeous gems
Craftily hewn from the hold of the earth."

Loud laughed Hogni. "Leave it for dragons
Sour with aging to sulk over treasure!
Let cowards be misers—a man is before you!
I want no baubles, but Wayland's sword.

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They cheered the sentiment, but I was wry in my mind. Catch these or any other Danes I'd ever met turning down loot in favor of honor! Still the fact that they knew how they ought to feel was sufficient for my purposes.

Not gladly given, the glaive was his
And warriors ran for weapons, raging;
They were all fain to follow Hogni;
Who leaped to leave them, laughing his triumph.

The noise unknotted the noose of sleep
That bound the fire-drake, fiercely it reared;
Sure no sword could shear its armor,
It deemed then Hogni was done with life.

But Wayland forges no false weapons—
They're valkyries with vampire mouths,
Brands that none but the Norns can break—
And Hogni carved to its cold heart.

Maddened with anger oncoming trolls
Rushed to catch and kill the riever,
But skillful on skis he skimmered away,
Bearing his booty back to his steading.

They roared cheers, and Thorgrim himself refilled my cup. "Have you any particular plan?" he asked when we had toasted each other.

"Why?" I inquired offhandedly.

"We've a long voyage ahead, and there's not a *skald* in the company. It ought to be a pretty interesting trip for you, too. Why don't you join us?"

I made as if to consider. "Where do you go now?"

"To the Spanish slave markets," he answered. "Maybe," and he tapped the Varangian ax, "I may even to decide to go back to Miklagard after that."

Constantinople was a place I had long wanted to see, and Spain I had only visited once. "Thanks. I'd like to join you."

"Good," he nodded, and we both turned to watch the galleys land.

CHAPTER XIV

HOW TO RESCUE A LADY

I WAS feeling good. Here my life was all arranged once more, and the prospects were excellent. If we made the great journey to Byzantium it would be strange if I couldn't find the makings of some good poems. Moreover, if the expedition was successful I should return with pelf to spare. Triumphant chiefs are generous in their gifts to *skalds*.

Best of all was the thought of getting out of that accursed country where nothing ever turned out well for me. I shook my head cheerfully at thought of the Pictish priest. He had made good his threat, and I was glad to get out from under.

The first boat contained the plunder, including a half-dozen newly made slaves. With drowsy compassion I watched them being herded ashore. Then the roof of hope fell in. "Holy St. Patrick!" I breathed. But I knew that neither he nor anyone else would help me.

The fourth of the lot was the girl I'd met at the ford. It wasn't that I cared for her as such or had the slightest concern for her personal welfare. She and her bravos had given me a bad scare, and I hadn't wanted to re-encounter her. And at that moment I would have given all Charlemagne's empire, had I owned it, for the privilege of not seeing her again.

Or if I hadn't seen her before it would have been all right.

But I had looked on this girl in her pride, and I knew she was not like these wretches with her. She was of my own sort. So, though we had met as enemies, the fact that we had met at all before placed an obligation on me. I shivered, feeling sick.

Her frightened eyes glared hate as the Vikings cheered her beauty, but Thorgrim came between her and a couple of drunken youngsters. "Who takes prizes first?" he asked them dangerously, nor were they too crazed to remember he was chief.

Mustering a guard, Thorgrim sent the prisoners to join the others in one of the ships. "One good thing about getting older," he said as he resettled himself comfortably, "is that you don't let women interfere with the profits.

"When I was the age of those boys I would have taken that girl for my own,

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and very likely she would have knifed me for it as soon as she got the chance. As it is I'll get a good price for her from some Moor, and let him get killed instead." He stretched. "Feel like giving us another song?"

"No," I said. I didn't yet see what I could do.

I GAINED nothing but a headache and a morosely fatal feeling from that night, and I took ship the next morning with only the knowledge that I'd make some sort of gesture toward freeing the girl. Thorgrim, as I had taken for granted he would, had arranged that she, as his most valuable prisoner, should voyage in his galley. He took the tiller to steer up river, and I stood silently beside him.

It was just after we had started that she recognized me for the first time. I saw her eyes widen, then her mouth set in a yet harder line of hate. No doubt I was in just such company as she would have expected. I looked away from her, sweeping earth and sky in an aimless search for courage.

My mouth was dry, and my hands started to sweat. If I was to help the girl, now was the time, before she was borne too far from kinsmen or friends who might take her in. Otherwise I'd have her on my hands, and the last thing I wanted was somebody to look after in that land where I wasn't able to keep any decent footing for myself.

When the ship had straightened its course to head upriver I got behind Thorgrim. In addition to being jumpy with nervousness, I disliked so repaying his hospitality, but there was no other solution.

"Thorgrim," I told him, letting him feel the point, "there's a knife at your back. Move or yell, and you die."

He stiffened, but that was all. "Well?" he queried; and his whisper carried his anger as well as a shout could have done.

"It's the girl there. I want you to put us both ashore."

"I might have known she'd make trouble," he said bitterly. "Why didn't you say you wanted her? Maybe I'd have given her to you."

I paid no attention to that. Nor was there any use in telling him that I didn't want her. He would merely have considered that incomprehensible meanness. I was sorry I couldn't make him understand, for we had been friendly.

"Put us on the north bank," I ordered.

He was too surprised and furious to stop arguing and make up his mind. "Why didn't you fight me for her openly?" He was still pursuing the ethics of the case. "Only a dirty Irishman would drink a man's wine, then knife him when his back was turned."

Not bothering to point out that the wine in question was really the property of St. Lucien Abbey, I pricked him a little harder. If it came to the pinch I'd decided to kill him, too. He showed no mercy to any, and my last act would be to see that he had none.

"Well?" I said in turn.

"No!"

He meant it. A Danish chief will do anything rather than compromise with his own sense of dignity. He'd let us both die and be damned before he'd accept the ignominy of being forced to surrender a valuable prize in the presence of his own men. I sought desperately for a sop to his pride.

"Look!" I urged. "If you'll give her to me and let us go free I'll make a lay about how Thorgrim the Varanger fared back from Miklagard to avenge his brother."

That had actually been a notable exploit, because Sweyn Bucktooth had had a great reputation as a warrior. "I'll sing the tale in every land I visit," I continued persuasively, "and I'll write it in runes for men that live after us to read."

It was that last touch that won him. A Dane is as desirous of having his name and exploits known by later generations as a saint could be of securing a place near the throne of Heaven. Every man to his own immortality.

"Do you give your word that you'll do

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this?" he asked, and the burden of death started to slip from me.

"I swear it by my God and by Odin," I answered earnestly. "If I don't make this lay within three months and sing it in every country I fare to, may my bones be dug up and mouthed by cur-dogs."

That apparently satisfied him. "Sheathe your knife," he whispered. "I give my word to the bargain." Gulping with relief, I stepped forward to stand in friendly fashion beside him. Signaling for the remaining galleys to proceed, he swung the tiller of his own to head it for the shore.

"Vikings!" he cried when the oars were dipping just enough to hold the dragon's nose on the north bank, "my friend the great *skald* is going to make a hero-lay about how we fought our way through the Middle Sea to Miklagard.

"He'll tell of the treasure we won and how word came that my brother was slain. He'll tell how Sweyn's blood paid the *weregeld* when I followed him to the Western Isles; and now how we return to Miklagard for more honor and wealth!"

HIS men cheered him, themselves, and me. All that Thorgrim had promised them hadn't been specified in our contract, but I nodded my acceptance. He raised his voice again, now carried away by the magnificence of his own gesture. "For reward I am giving him the lovely Frankish maiden."

He made the statement with telling directness, and the applause was great. Generosity in requiting service is one of the hallmarks of a Danish chieftain of standing, and this was a princely gift. None of his followers dreamed that Thorgrim would turn over such a prize to them, so they didn't begrudge me my supposed good fortune.

"*Skalds* make fame, the only good thing a man can have," an older man quoted. "No gift is too fine to exchange for it."

It was a high moment for all of them. I could see the younger ones adream for the day when their adventures should be sung and the singer rewarded with a hero's magnanimity. Of all those there I alone knew how Thorgrim would soon regret his loss.

Forcing myself to appear pleasurably excited, I made an appropriately grateful speech in answer, told them how fortunate I thought they were to have such a chief to lead them, and wished them luck in all ensuing exploits. Then I hastily strode toward the girl.

Up till then, being ignorant of Danish, she had naturally been unaware of what had been taking place. "You're free," I said in Frankish as I took her by the wrist. "Come on ashore fast!"

But all men seemed enemies to her then, and she did not remember me kindly. She snatched her arm away and backed from me. "Let me alone!" she screeched.

Her delay in the face of the necessity for haste infuriated me. "They'll sell you to an oily Moorish!" I told her bluntly.

Her eyes wavered, and I seized her during that instant of uncertainty. Picking her up, I stepped forward and dropped her overside in the soft mud. I was standing beside her by the time she had risen.

Panic and loathing had rendered her incapable of making distinctions between grades of bad situations, and my roughness had aroused furious antagonism. She struck me hard, and the Vikings peering over the gunwhale laughed uproariously.

"Better trade it in for a tame one," a man counseled me sagely.

"What odds on the *skald?*"

"No takers!"

"He hasn't got a chance!"

I was keenly conscious of the ridiculousness of my position. Moreover, Thorgrim might take advantage of her obvious unwillingness to go with me to rescind his gift. Shifting my harp out of the way, I ducked under her next swing, grabbed her around the knees, and heaved her over my shoulder. Then by sheer force of will I bore her up the bank in spite of her kicking, hitting, and scratching.

The Danes were overjoyed at my difficulties, but a glance showed me that Thorgrim wasn't joining in the mirth. Pleasure

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at his gesture was already past, and he was remembering to what an extent it had been compulsory. It would be bad luck for me to meet that man again.

CHAPTER XV

NIGHTMARE YESTERDAY

AS SOON as we were out of sight in the trees I dropped her unceremoniously and put my foot on her throat. "Move and I'll step down," I warned her.

Her nails had made some uncomfortable gouges in my back, and I was in no mood to humor her. "Now," I went on as she lay still, "let's get a couple of things straight. The only thing I want or ever have wanted to do with you is to get rid of you. Do you know how to get home from here?"

It took her a minute to receive the import of what I was saying. Her eyes grew dazed then, and I took my foot from her neck, certain she would cause no more trouble.

"There is no home," she finally said. I could see her thinking about it and, as she thought, emotion emerging from the depths where it had been driven by overwhelming horror. Soon she was sobbing terribly, but I was no one to comfort her. I walked a little apart to review and face my own problems.

The night before I had been the chosen companion of a successful chieftain and bound on a voyage that promised to reestablish my fortunes. Now he had become my enemy, as all men seemed to be these days, and I was moneyless as well as horseless in a country marked perilous for me. Worse than all, I had a charge I must somehow dispose of before I could get around to the much more desirable business of improving my personal circumstances.

It had been my hope that all that would be required of me would be to take her to her home. She had stated that she had none, and I assumed that the Danes had destroyed it. If there was anyone else who would undertake her care I piously prayed that he didn't live far away.

Some while later she was quiet and slept, exhausted by emotional stress. I let it be so on the theory that she would be more rational after some rest. Bored, nervous, and fuming with impatience, I alternately paced and sat till at length she roused herself. Gloomily I returned her dull stare.

"Who are you?" she asked; and it occurred to me that a woman is never too hard put for personalities.

"You say you have no home," I brushed the question aside. "Is there any other place where it would be good for you to go?"

I thought she was going to break down again, but she controlled herself and shook her head. "No place near here. The Danes—" She spread out her hands and stopped.

"I can guess," I put in. "They killed everybody that got in their way, looted your home, and burned it."

"My mother didn't fight them, but they killed her as well as my father and the rest. Why?" She was like a hurt child trying to find out about the world.

"Too old to be a useful slave," I explained somberly. I knew Dane ways. They had killed the woman for that mysteriously exciting moment when life ceases to be.

"Most of our people ran away when they heard the Danes were coming. Only our household men stayed with us. We beat off the first batch, but lots more came. Now I'm the only one left."

SHE had to talk about it to get free of it at all, so, though restless and annoyed, I let her go on. It was not that I felt no pity for her, but the necessities of the future were then too imperious for me to be interested in any phase of the past.

"All right," I said when she had finally paused to give me an opening, "there's nothing left for you around here. True?"

"It's true," she muttered, "but—"

"Never mind," I interrupted before she could get started again. "Is there any place at all where friends would welcome you? You've got to go somewhere, you know,"

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I elaborated when she failed to show interest.

"Yes, that's so, I suppose." She passed a hand over her eyes. "A cousin of mine is married to a man north of here. It was she I was visiting when I met you at the ford."

As she said that, I had an ironic mental picture of the stout lads that had been with her and how angry they had been with me for menacing this girl. Now they were all dead, and I had their job.

"How far away would that be?" I asked her.

"About forty miles. More if anything."

"Any chance of finding a couple of horses around your place?"

She shivered. "The barn caught fire during the attack, and we were too busy to save them."

I grunted. It would be a dangerous trip on foot, but it had to be attempted. I wished then that I had had more of an appetite at breakfast. "If you know how to find the road to your cousin's we'd better get started," I suggested.

But now she was sullen about a remark I'd made two hours before. "You said you only wanted to get rid of me," she pointed out. "You don't have to come."

Exasperation choked me. "You were a slave, and I overpaid them buying you for a song!" I snarled when I could think of nothing to say. "If I want to go some place with you, why that's my business!" Then the absurdity of it all took hold of me, and I laughed.

"What's funny?" She was more sulky than ever.

"You wouldn't see it," I told her. "Now listen carefully. I don't like to stress the fact, but I was of some assistance in getting you out of the hands of the Danes. It's possible, too, that I could be of help in case you encountered local bandits. Shall we stop the foolishness and get under way?"

Theretofore I had doubtless appeared to her as one more irritant in a nightmare world. Now at last it was borne in upon her that I was a man who was putting himself to some inconvenience on her account. She was as yet too upset to order her mind, but she made an effort to place me in the scheme of things.

"Why do you take the trouble?"

"I don't know any better," I said wearily. There was no use in trying to explain what I myself but hazily understood.

She got up, staring haggardly around as if she had never seen anything before. "You're trying hard to do something for me." She looked at me again. "You had been going somewhere in that ship, hadn't you?"

"That had been my intention," I said drily.

"You got off for me. Thank you." Then she added, quite irrelevantly: "I'm sorry I was rude to you then."

She was referring to our encounter at the ford. "At my age I should know better than to laugh at a woman," I apologized in my turn. "There's always trouble in it."

MAKING no answer, she started to pick her way through the woods, and I followed. In a short while we came to a path which soon led us to the road to Tours.

There was no one in sight, and I reflected that the Danes had been of service to us by clearing the district of other marauders. Not until we were well inland should there be any especial need for cautious faring.

A half mile west on the highway we found a narrow road running north into which she turned. I was glum enough, and my knowledge of the despair my companion was in didn't help to make the journey more cheerful. She said no more about her grief, but every now and then I noted that she was weeping silently.

She didn't care enough either to walk well or to rest, but I made her stop about once an hour. Not only was she tired to begin with, but I guessed that she hadn't eaten since the previous day.

Having no food, I could see nothing for it but to forge ahead as swiftly as the adverse circumstances would permit. But it

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was sultry, even in the forest, and toward late afternoon the high heat of the day began to tell on the girl.

She was asleep almost as soon as I suggested that she lie down, but, though I stretched out, I was listening alertly to make sure we wouldn't be taken by surprise. In the end I was reluctantly forced to sacrifice comfort to keenness.

She had rolled over on her back, I saw when I sat up to drive sleep away, and was slumbering soundly. With the drawn, lost expression smoothed from her face she looked appealingly sweet and young. I shrugged. Life never cares to whom its most terrifying phases are shown. Things happen, and there are but two responsive choices—acceptance or death.

A deer almost stepped on us, got panic-stricken when it noticed our presence, and crashed away through the underbrush. Awakened by the noise, she opened her eyes. I looked away, having no words to offer, but I could feel her studying me.

"You don't make any more sense to me than the Danes did," she said suddenly.

I was startled by this sudden attack. "Why?"

"It puts me just as much at a loss to be under the wing of a perfect stranger as it does to be warred on by somebody that's not an enemy. They weren't enemies, you see. They weren't even angry—just businesslike. On the other hand you're doing me a great favor without having any kindness for me."

"Oh well," I said, taken aback.

"You're not even doing it because you disliked the Danes," she pursued. "You knew they were all thieves and murderers, and yet you were willing to travel with them."

"There are thieves and murderers everywhere in France," I reminded her. "Slave owners, too. Danes make good friends, as far as that's concerned, if you don't allow yourself to be bothered by their morals, and personally I've always found my own about all I could rightly handle." I stood up by way of ending the discussion. "It'll be cooler walking now."

CHAPTER XVI

SING THE SWINE'S PRAISES

IT WAS almost at the point of night when our luck broke down. There was a shrill whistle off the right, and immediately afterward I heard a bunch of men running toward the road. I didn't need to be told what was happening. Unless I was much mistaken, the thing I had most feared had come to pass. We had walked into the clutches of one of the roving outlaw bands.

I grabbed the girl's arm and shook her for emphasis. "Hide off there!" I commanded, shoving her toward the woods to the left.

She hesitated. "But—"

"Get going!" I whispered fiercely, "and don't come out unless I call you." When I shoved her again she complied, and I commenced singing loudly to cover the sound of her movements.

"Hallo!" I called out jovially when the men were almost upon me. "Anybody there who has food for a hungry man?"

There were eight or ten of them, their truculence the more disturbing because of the dark, and I couldn't see just how ready they were to act. They were, however, seemingly surprised by my friendliness, so they started off by asking questions instead of getting rough.

"Who are you?"

"A strolling minstrel," I answered, shifting my harp into the line of what vision was left.

"I thought there was a couple of 'em when I gave the signal," another spoke up.

"I wish to hell there had been," I said. "It's been so lonesome on the way that I felt like a fellow left on the world by mistake after Doomsday."

"Aw, everybody's hiding from the Danes!" a third complained with professional envy. "There's nothing left for us when they've passed by."

I was feeling a little more easy. "If you're robbers," I laughed, "you're wasting your time with me. Not a coin to my name."

"What are you doing up here where

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there's no one to pay you for singing?"

"Oh, I ran from the Danes, too," I answered with some measure of truth, if not too much. "Moreover, I didn't have a lot of breakfast, and I've had no food since. What do you say to giving me a meal in exchange for a few songs?"

They frisked me expertly but found I was as poor as I said I was. "Let's take him to Piers and see what he wants done with him," an outlaw suggested.

I didn't like the sound of that, but there was no choice, so through the forest I went with them. We were striking directly away from the girl, leaving her a free trail which I hoped she had sense enough to make use of promptly. Now that we had met one band the odds were in favor of a safe road ahead for her.

Before us there was much loud talking and laughter, and in a minute I saw the flicker of a fire. Quite a large one it proved to be, a high blazer with about eighty men, women, brats, and assorted in-betweens lounging in its warmth and glow. The sight of them amply confirmed my forebodings. I had fallen into bad company indeed.

THIS was that part of the people who had enough strength to refuse the role of serf but not enough to establish a natural and healthy place for themselves as free men. They were far more savage than the Danes, who at least preserved certain dignities of life among themselves, however prone they might be to force chaos on others.

Piers, the leader, proved to be a ruddy, flat-faced man of about my height, though a little more powerfully built. He was fairly drunk, and he didn't hold his face together the way a proper drinking man should. Having energy and strength without purpose, he personified the whole lot of them. I was very nervous as I stood before him, because there is something peculiarly horrible about persons who act without reason.

His initial moves were direct enough, though. "That's a fine sword you're sporting," he remarked after my captors had passed on the information I had given them.

"It's not bad," I muttered, "considering I got it just for being in a house when its owner wasn't." I was trying to invoke the old law of thieves respecting the loot of colleagues, but he wasn't moved.

"Easy come, easy go," he said and laughed as he took it from me. "You wear pretty nice clothes, too," he went on after looking me over again.

I didn't think so much of them myself, although as compared with his own they were finery. "We'll swap," he announced, starting to strip then and there.

Silently swearing vengeance if ever the opportunity for it should come my way, I imitated him, while his unkempt following aggravated the indignity by cheers, laughter, and meaningless insults. As I had feared, his clothes were greasy and alive with fleas. I gulped to control my temper, and achieved a smile.

"Your friends forgot to tell you this," I said, "but in addition to being poor I'm hungry. Will you feed me if I give you a song or so?"

He was delighted with himself because of his new possessions, and started to give good-humored acquiescence. Then it evidently struck him that I hadn't been sufficiently hazed. "I'll tell you what I'll do," he said, with a wink at his audience. "If your song's good I'll let you eat and drink, too. If it isn't good I'll slit your throat to make sure I won't have to listen to you again."

He led his rabble's noisy appreciation of his wit by slapping his thigh, and I lodged one more score against him in the event I lived to meet him again. Actually I was not afraid of disappointing a group it was so easy to please.

All that I had to do was to make them laugh, then Piers would have no grounds for fatal practical jokes; and I knew what to give them. Like Gaimar their kind really saw no humor except in bawdiness, and there was no phase of it, so convinced were they that it was always funny, that wouldn't convulse them.

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Swallowing my wrath again, I decided upon a ballad I'd heard at an inn in Paris some years before. It was a direct, lively thing, well suited to their simple taste; and before I'd gone far with it, they were leering happily. I finished it off with all the noisy heartiness I could muster, and they roared delightedly.

PIERS, I was relieved to note, laughed as loudly as any of the others. "Give the man food!" he commanded as impressively as if he were an emperor decreeing a new law. "Ale here for the minstrel!" Then he snapped his fingers in salute to an idea. "Can you make poems as well as sing?"

"Sometimes," I said cautiously.

"That's great!" he commented, irritating me by throwing his arm around my shoulder. "From now on you'll be my own particular bard."

That wasn't a suggestion; it was a statement of ordained fact. He meant to confer a favor, and I murmured my recognition; but that didn't alter my status as prisoner. That such a wild cur should think I'd allow him to be my patron annoyed me, but I didn't let it spoil my appetite for good venison. The ale was heavy and bitter, yet I reasoned that my new fleas would keep me awake if I did not drink with a will.

"You've come along at a lucky time for you," Piers roared confidentially. "I'm going to claim all the land around here and set myself up as baron."

"Yes?" I said with mild interest. With food and ale in me, my resentment was more or less quiescent.

"Sure. There'll be fighting, of course, but they'll have to give me what I want."

"Who will?"

He frowned. "There are three fellows who've been rowing about who's going to run this part of the world. I'm making myself the fourth. They wouldn't listen to me a while back, but they'll have to from now on. You see, I've not only got these of my own crew, but I've lined up other outlaw gangs."

I knew how hopeless it was to try to get such bands to act in concert, but, of course, I didn't tell him that. "I've just arrived in this locality," I lied.

"Like I told you," he answered, "besides me there are three men who count hereabouts. There's a fellow called Chilbert to the south and east, there's a fellow called Conan to the north, and the Abbot of St. Charles is sandwiched in between."

Perforce their local politics had come to be a matter of real interest to me as one by one I had encountered the figures he had mentioned. "Who's top rooster?"

"They don't know it yet," he said, "but I'm going to be. I'm smart enough to wait for the right time, though, see? But just now the abbot's got the best grip on what he has, and Chilbert has the most land and people."

This was my first chance to get definite word of Conan. "How about the other fellow? Is he getting frozen out?"

"He's newer come than the others and harder to figure, but he's got quite a name as a fighter." He chuckled harshly. "A whole bunch of Chilbert's men ran Conan and another to earth and were damn sorry later. Conan and his partner stood them off, killed plenty and left their marks on a lot more."

Now I had the opening to discover what I really wanted to know. "You mean to say he did all that and got off scot free?"

"NOT exactly but near enough. He was carved up quite a bit himself, I hear, although he's as good as new now. As a matter of fact the business turned out fine for him, because it made him famous and made the others look like fools.

"Conan rubbed it in, too, sending his minstrel around with a funny version of the story that had everybody laughing at Chilbert. A lot of men who'd been getting ready to join up with him decided to hold off after that until they can be surer about just who's who."

That was an interesting development. "What do you think is going to happen now?" I inquired.

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"Oh, Chilbert and Conan will have a showdown soon. One will beat the other, but even so the winner will get too much fighting for his own good, see? So I'll jump on the winner before his men get a chance to rest up, and I'll beat him. Then I'll tell the abbot he can keep his land if he pays me for being nice." He beamed at me as if my face in reality mirrored his self-approval.

I wasn't at all impressed by this drunkard's dreams. "Suppose Conan and Chilbert settle things peaceably," I suggested. "Where will you be then?"

"I'll make 'em split the loaf four ways anyhow," he said, "because I'll take my share without asking them whether they like it. Pretty soon, when I get around to it, that is. But Chilbert won't settle without war. He wants everything in reach, and besides Conan has made too much fun of him."

He barked laughter. "I bet Chilbert could chew rocks every time he thinks how he had his fingers on Conan and let him slip away." With an inebriate's emotional vagaries he suddenly ceased to be mirthful. "Conan would never have worked out of my hand," he said grimly.

"No?"

"No! He had his chance to be my friend and passed it up. When the time comes I'll remind him of that."

"What happened?"

"Well, he came along about when I was getting ready to make my bid. I figured that neither of us was as strong then as we might have been and offered to join up with him and split what we could take. He sent back word that he'd just missed hanging a pig the day before, thinking it was me."

Piers glared in indignant recollection, and I shook my head, making deprecating sounds. "He said," the outlaw went on heavily, "that he'd apologized to the pig when the pig explained the difference, and that the next time he'd get the noose on the right neck. He meant mine by that," Piers concluded unnecessarily.

I was pleased with Conan. "What do you think could have given him an idea like that?" I wondered.

"Aw, he thinks he's better than everybody else because his people have been chiefs around here for a couple of hundred years. But men and forts make a lot more difference these days than who your grandfather was. I'll show him, and I'll show the others, too.

"Chilbert wouldn't have me for his ally either, because he wants to run everything all by himself. He had the nerve to tell me I could fight for him, though. Can you beat that? Why if anybody should follow anybody, he should follow me!"

"Obviously," I said. "How do you get along with the abbot?"

Piers damned the abbot. "We've been enemies from the first, so I never tried to join up with him. I made a raid on his territory once when I first got in power just to let people know I was around." He looked thoughtful as if contemplating the memory.

"Did you give him a lesson?" I prodded, being certain he had done no such thing.

"No," he admitted grudgingly, "but that was before I had the following I have now. I'll show him the next time I fight him."

THINKING of Father Clovis and the other soldierly priests I'd dined with, I looked around at his frowsy, undisciplined outlaws and doubted him. Some were already nodding, and all would soon be asleep.

I didn't believe for an instant that what sentries there might be would make an all-night vigil of it, especially as I had noticed that the fellows who had brought me in had never returned to their posts. Maybe an organized body could have been made of those men, but it hadn't been done.

Not that I disapproved. I was elated with the assurance that escape could be easily achieved by refraining from drink the next time they went in for it heavily. At the moment, however, I was very tired and sleepy myself, and I was wishing that Piers would let me rest.

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But drink had expanded his natural tendency to brag, and I as the one person present who hadn't heard it all before was his inevitable victim. "They all think I'm no smarter than the other outlaws," he informed me, "but they're wrong. I know what's got to be done to hold my land just as well as any of 'em.

"You've got to build stone forts. Not wooden halls with dirt walls around them that anybody can climb over, but high, straight up-and-down stone walls. That's the only way you can be safe from attack and have a safe place to attack and have a safe place to attack from."

"How many have you built so far?" I was mean enough to want to know.

"None yet, but I'm going to. Come to think of it, I guess I'll start one tomorrow. How's that for a good idea?"

"Excellent," I granted, "but if you're going to do that we'd better get some sleep."

"Yeah, that's right." He roared for somebody to keep the fire going and lay down where he was. I followed his example gladly, even though I didn't anticipate a hard day of fort building. For if Piers should happen to remember and persevere with his scheme, those men of his would abruptly leave him for a less ambitious leader. They weren't spiritually geared for long-term hard work.

I yawned, scratched, and adjusted myself to the ground as comfortably as I could. Even for that country it had been something of a day, and I wondered at the turn of events. Was I ever, I wondered somewhat wildly, going to be permitted to leave, or was I forever doomed to be jerked back like a training hawk just when I was certain of freedom? Fortunately sleep stopped such futile speculations, until I waked with a grouch, stiff muscles, new flea bites, and the taste of too much bad-quality ale sour in my mouth.

It was cool, early morning, and the fire

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had died to ashes. I shuffled over to get what heat was left and stared at the recumbent figures distastefully. They might not look as savage as they had by firelight, but they looked a great deal fouler, especially the women.

I understood why these people had become what they were, but I could feel no more pity for them now than I felt for a long-dead fish. They had become too alien and would so remain until law, if it ever did, should come again to restore a little of the pride in human dignity without which man is not. I spat and waited for Piers to wake.

CHAPTER XVII

I BID THE FLEAS GOODBYE

WITH them it was gorge or go hungry. There was no ale left, and Piers, who had seen to it that there was no ale left, was much aggrieved. He kicked the cask, hurt his toe, then took vengeance for it by booting a little girl who had the misfortune to be passing. She did no harm to his foot and screamed satisfyingly.

After a grumpy breakfast he decided to move south in hopes of intercepting men straggling back toward the Loire with what possessions they had been able to keep out of reach of the Danes. I walked with him at the head of the mob, and as we reached the road I noted with relief that the girl's tracks showed she had gone on.

That was the only thing I had to be glad of for three days more. I might, indeed, have escaped during anyone of the nights, but I wasn't going to leave without my sword, and Piers was too sober to make its retrieving possible. It was not only that it would have been stupid to go anywhere alone without a weapon in that country, but I valued that particular sword. It was an excellent blade whose weight and balance exactly suited me, and I strongly begrudged its use to a mean, shiftless braggart.

He tried me to my limits of control by giving me what passes for friendship with such a man. That is to say, he talked about himself continuously, and it was my business to chime in with applause at appropriate intervals.

Volubility unalleviated by a sound worldly outlook, scholarship, or humor is a sin for which I have no charity. I don't mind a man being a fool if he has but the grace not to rub it in. My chagrin was aggravated, moreover, by the fact that I could neither avoid his company nor voice any of the cutting remarks that crowded into my mind.

The other men were inclined to be sullen because I basked in the great man's favor, and the women were inclined to be vulgarly arch for the same reason. The first I didn't mind because I could pay no attention, but an aggressive wanton is harder to snub than a month-old puppy.

We never went more than a few miles in a day, for when nothing happened everybody got tired of walking. Then, too, they were living largely on game, and hunting took a great deal of time.

It wasn't till the third day that they netted their first windfall. To my intense satisfaction as well as theirs, a group of their foragers had run across a wain loaded with wine casks. It wasn't very good wine, but I was confident that Piers would oblige me by getting drunk on it.

He started pouring it into himself at a great rate, and all but the youngest children followed his example. Drunkenness was attained all the more speedily because they forgot all about supper, which had been in preparation when the wine arrived. I rescued a part of one joint of venison, but the rest of it was allowed to burn up.

In an hour the camp was a scene of rampant sordidness. Men, women, and children in varying stages of inebriety and sickness fought and cursed according to their respective abilities. Of course, there was also considerable merriment in the form of songs, good-natured insults, and violent practical jokes.

I KEPT out of trouble by playing my harp and staying close to Piers. Music has more power over the drunken than

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over the sober, and by playing gay tunes I was able to keep him in a good humor most of the time.

As a result, he was greatly pleased with me and shooed away any man or woman who showed an inclination to interrupt or otherwise annoy me. The drawback to the arrangement was that he kept filling my cup, and I did not, for once in my life, want to drink very much. Ultimately my only defense against his hospitality was feigning tipsiness on an amount I'd scorn to have affect me.

"Drink up!" Piers yelled, though I wasn't two feet from him.

"Had enough," I said thickly and yawned.

"Aw, you haven't had enough to get a baby drunk."

"Haven't had enough for you," I said ponderously, "but I've had enough for me. I wish I could drink as much as you can, but I can't." I shook my head as if in wonder. "I never saw anybody who can drink as much as you can."

He was delighted at this tribute to his prowess and immediately became sympathetic toward my frailty. "Everybody can't expect to drink like I can," he told me kindly. "Why don't you go sleep it off?"

I rose falteringly. "Guess I will. Don't see how you do it."

He laughed, and I made my uneven way to the edge of the firelight. Being on the opposite of the fire from the wine cask, the spot I had chosen was comparatively free from traffic. I sat down awkwardly, then sprawled to watch and wait.

It was some hours before Piers gave up, and I began to fear that he would drink the night out. He was, in truth, nearly as capacious a drinker as he thought he was, and he kept filling his cup as soon as it was emptied, which never took him long. Even in sottishness magnitude is awe-inspiring, and I half-admired him as cup after cup found him on his feet, his zest apparently undiminished.

Eventually the only thing that could have helped me came to pass. All the rest had given in to the wine, but Piers and two of his followers still worked at it, not certain of thought, speech, or movement, but undaunted. The smoke from the dying fire prevented a clear view of the cask itself, but I saw one of them walk toward it, then heard him swear plaintively.

"What do you know? The thing's empty!"

Considering the enormous amounts that had been drunk, plus the quantities that had been wasted through tipsy clumsiness, I was not surprised. Piers, however, was outraged. "It can't be!" he declared.

"Well," the other presented his grounds for belief, "you turn the spiggot, and nothing comes."

"Maybe you don't know how to turn a spiggot right," the third man said hopefully.

"I guess I can turn a spiggot as well as the next man. It's empty I tell you! Shall we start on another?"

I held my breath, but Piers saw an insurmountable objection. "It'd be too much work getting it off the wain. Besides, I'm getting kind of sleepy."

"I'm about ready to call it a night, too," one of the others confessed.

Piers lay down about thirty feet away from me, and I gave him a half hour or so to find the depths of sleep. The wine's victory was all the more complete for being belated, and I saw as I stood over him that nothing short of violence could rouse him.

I looked around. Nobody was paying any attention to me, though one man nearby opened his eyes. The sight of me seemed more than he could bear, for he closed them again and rolled over.

IN another minute I had unbuckled my sword from around Piers' waist. It surely felt good to have a weapon, particularly that one, in my hand again after so many defenseless hours. In a great rush of relief I realized I was free of those graceless churls, free of Piers and his inextinguishable boasting, and free, best of all, to go my own way.

I felt so good about it that I almost

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let Piers off, but just in time I remembered the little girl he had kicked. Drawing back my foot, I gave him all I had. I didn't hear any ribs crack, but he'd be sure to find them sore the next morning. At the moment, however, he only realized that something had waked him up.

"What's the matter?" he asked, raising up on one elbow.

"Nothing," I responded cheerfully.

"That's good," he said and went to sleep again. Humming to myself, I picked my way through the woods till I came to the road. The southern route was still closed to me, and by Danes perhaps as well as Chilbert, so I shrugged and stepped out north.

I had become used to the knowledge that such things as where I myself wanted to go or what I wanted to do were now factors of negligible importance in my life. I didn't like my predicament, but it hadn't begun to pinch me yet, so there was no use in getting depressed about it.

I traveled briskly, thus keeping warm as well as putting distance between myself and Piers. I had little fear that he would bother to pursue me, as far as that was concerned, but there was no sense in making it easy for him if he should happen to. Two wolves, needlessly suspecting competition, looked up from the dead outlaw they'd been sharing and snarled at me as I passed; but otherwise nothing happened for several hours.

When the sun was high enough to give genuine warmth, I sat down by a stream and finished the joint of venison, the remnant of which I'd taken the precaution of putting in my scrip. From that point on, I reflected as I tossed the bone away, I'd be living off the country. My immediate problem, though, was sleep, not food, so I followed the brook into the woods, looking for a likely place to rest. Not fifty feet in, but yet out of sight of the road, was a little open patch with the sun full on it, and I stripped happily.

"You should have stayed on Piers," I told my fleas. "He would never have done this to you." I soaked my greasy garments, scrubbed them with clay, rubbed them on a flat rock, rinsed them, wrung them, and spread them to dry. The water felt marvelous when I got around to immersing myself, and the clay took the grime from me. It was wonderful to feel the cleanness as I lay down, sun-warmed. I slept soon.

IT WAS fine to wake as I did a couple of hours later, thoroughly refreshed and with the knowledge that for the moment, at least, everything was as it should be.

I was in the shade by then, but the little breeze that ran over me from time to time was just the right temperature. The stream was casually musical and quiet about it, the forest was sultrily aromatic, and the trees individually were high-reaching and clean-cut. So I started to sing.

After finishing the first song it struck me that I was in excellent voice, and others were rendered as they came to me. Finally I thought of a poem I'd written when I was quite a youngster, and out of pure, good spirits I boomed it forth at the top of my voice.

I'm older than God, but gay and frisky.
I'll never die,
Which may seem odd
Till I tell you why:
I drained off my blood and put in whisky.
Yes, by damn!
Dram by dram
And likewise bottle by bottle,
I poured it in
To fill my skin
Through an ever ready throttle.

It had been a long time, I reflected wistfully, since I'd had any whisky. It is strange that only the Irish and the Scotch have the sense to make that excellent drink.

I had a young wife, both fair and frisky;
But what the hell!
A wedded life,
As you know right well,
Can play the devil with drinking whisky.
I was strong:
Wrong is wrong,
And surely duty is duty.
I ditched the hen,
For I scorn men

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Who'll scamp ideals for a beauty.
Death called for me. He was feeling frisky,
Sure of his kill;
But wait and see—
He guzzled his fill
And a whole lot more, of good, strong whisky.
Fool to think,
Drink for drink,
That he could better his better!
I watched him fold
And, passed out cold,
Crouch at my feet like a setter.

Oh, what a head! Death didn't feel frisky
When he came to.
"Can't I be dead,
Not feel like I do?"
He groaned—"

If I hadn't been bellowing I would have had warning earlier. As it was, they were almost on me before I heard the horses. Having time for nothing else, I dove for my sword, and that was the nearest thing to a garment I had when the woman rode into the clearing.

The dozen or so men behind her could have ridden me down if they felt like it; therefore I didn't try to run. Instead I put my back against a tree, modestly thankful for a few low bushes, and looked out to see whether the new arrivals were enemies.

It was typical of the locale that I found an enemy forthwith. The first man to range himself beside the woman was the fellow who had chased me off my road and into Conan's life. A second later he recognized me.

"That's a spy of Chilbert's, Ann!" he told her. Then he looked at me, and I couldn't imagine why I'd once thought he had a merry, likeable face.

"Will you hang peaceably or are you going to fight?" he enquired.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Looking Ahead!

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"If I were to kill a man," the stranger said, "I would head right for Moemoeá." Whereupon the quiet guy at a nearby table got up and went out; and the next day. . . . Well, it's a beautiful place, Moemoeá—loveliest in the South Seas. And it's peaceful, and law-and-order goes around on two bare feet. But from the doorless huts, eyes watch. . . . A fine novelet of adventure and sudden death, by

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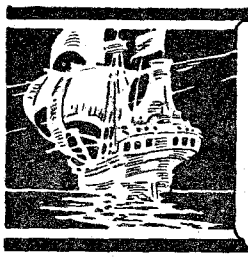

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

WE KNEW it was coming. A large portion of the citizens of the United States have violently declared themselves in favor of Charles Marquis Warren; and we knew that the gentleman who recently took exception to Mr. Warren's vocabulary was going to get into trouble. Already the indignant results are coming in—enough of them to keep us busy this week. There'll be more, too, we bet.

First, a reader who comes from right down there where the story takes place. May we present:

J. D. BIVINS

The May 25th issue of your ARGOSY is at hand and I am referring in particular to your Argonotes section where there is a letter written by L. W. Knowles criticizing Warren's story "Bugles Are for Soldiers."

The first few times I read the letter it did not make much sense; but when the meaning at last dawned on me, I experienced the same horrified incredulity I did upon hearing the Russians had attacked Finland. Could it be that the craftsman Warren was being called on the carpet for one of his excellent yarns?

Mr. Knowles' attack strikes me as being unjust. However, I cannot pose as a good critic, having had no classical education. As a matter of fact, although I read Warren's story and enjoyed it, I still do not know the meaning of the words "ungulate" and "saggitate." If I don't work up enough energy to consult the dictionary, I shall try to struggle on through life weighted down by this ignorance. I can't recall all the names of the characters in Warren's story, but I certainly do remember the characters.

Now, take Stevie, for instance. Real flesh and blood, the kind of person you meet in everyday life. I'm glad that Warren introduced me to the kid. Stevie with his fighting heart and his loyalty and his old battered bugle and his pathetic ignorance of those military details that West Point stresses. Stevie will do to tie to. I was too busy helping Warren's characters extricate themselves from their difficulties to notice the author's display of vocabulary.

I also enjoyed "Then I'll Remember." Let's have more stories by Warren. Bring on some more of those characters that step forth from the printed page and bid you hit the saddle with them to track down wild Injuns or to battle against seemingly hopeless odds in trying to clear oneself of an unjust charge.

Shoot the works, Warren! And I'll show you how proficient I am at dodging "showers" of saggitate stones. By the way, I happen to live within six miles of old Fort Wingate, now crumbled and decayed and nothing but a memory.

GRANTS, N. M.

The next letter, from a lady who has been loyal to ARGOSY for a good many years, is even more sharply critical of of Mr. Knowles. Anyhow, Mr. Warren will like what she says.

CATHERINE WILLARD

Have been a reader of ARGOSY for over thirty years, and never in all that time, have I missed a single copy. This is the first time I felt like adding my opinion on ARGONOTES.

The letter by Lewis W. Knowles, was disgusting; reminds one of a little school boy trying to show off. Why not have your finger nails trimmed, Mr. Knowles? It would be much better than chewing them off—a nasty habit and very unhealthy.

Why spoil a good magazine by publishing such letters. And now for C. M. Warren: My hat is off to you, Mr. Warren. "Bugles Are for Soldiers" was very interesting; keep up the good work, Mr. Warren. Keep ARGOSY as it is, and I feel sure you will meet the approval of the majority. What else matters?

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

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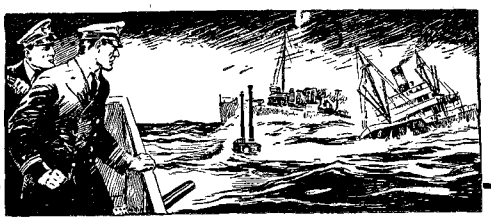

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